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News, views and agendas: talkback radio and Muslims

Abstract

Talkback radio has the power to attract and repel, delight and disgust in equal measures. The talkback phenomenon is defined by the extension of an invitation from the presenter to the audience to participate in the programme by phoning in, SMS messaging or emailing their views, opinions and contributions. While much of the Australian research in this field has been preoccupied with the talkback radio host as shock-jock and celebrity,¹ little attention has been paid to the way audiences conceptualise the space and themselves within that space. We initially set out to explore how talkback radio programmes affected audiences' perceptions of diversity, multiculturalism and current issues associated with these themes.² However, it became evident in the course of the research that issues around the perceived ownership of and right of access to the talkback space and identity—both cultural and national—were closely bound up with the original question we set out to explore. As we began thinking about and talking to mainstream talkback radio audience members, we identified another gap in the research—the scant attention paid by researchers to talkback spaces created as alternatives to populist talkback programmes. In considering those spaces and the mainstream commercial talkback agendas of recent times around ethnicity and religion, we identified two culturally distinct talkback spaces and subsequently gained access to some of their audience members, who we gathered into focus groups to discuss the issues outlined above.

Keywords

agendas, views, muslims, news, radio, talkback

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News, views and agendas: Talking about Muslims

Jacqui Ewart with Julie Posetti

Talkback radio has the power to attract and repel, delight and disgust in equal measures. The talkback phenomenon is defined by the extension of an invitation from the presenter to the audience to participate in the programme by phoning in, SMS messaging or emailing their views, opinions and contributions. While much of the Australian research in this field has been preoccupied with the talkback radio host as shock-jock and celebrity - little attention has been paid to the way audiences conceptualise the space and themselves within that space. We initially set out to explore how talkback radio programmes affected audiences' perceptions of diversity, multiculturalism and current issues associated with these themes. However, it became evident in the course of the research that issues around the perceived ownership of and right of access to the talkback space and identity- both cultural and national-were closely bound up with the original question we set out to explore. As we began thinking about and talking to mainstream talkback radio audience members, we identified another gap in the research-the scant attention paid by researchers to talkback spaces created as alternatives to populist talkback programmes. In considering those spaces and the mainstream commercial talkback agendas of recent times around ethnicity and religion, we identified two culturally distinct talkback spaces and subsequently gained access to some of their audience members, who we gathered into focus groups to discuss the issues outlined above.

The study from which this paper is drawn covered a number of themes that previously have not been explored by research in the field of talkback radio. However, in this paper we focus on two central ideas: (a) talkback radio's creation of a homeland for like-minded people and; (b) associated issues around identity and belonging. We look at talkback that some Australian Arabic speaking audiences are engaging with as a response to populist talkback radio programmes' handling of issues around identity and belonging. These themes have been chosen because Australia talkback has been frequently lambasted by researchers and commentators for its racist rhetoric, lack of diversity-and exclusion of minority voices.

In the wake of the 2005 Cronulla riots, which were judged by some observers to have been fanned by irresponsible and racist talk-back programmes, there was a renewed focus on talkback radio with attempts to measure the political influence and power of Australian talkback presenters. Researchers have more recently focused on the power of the talkback host and talkback's role in facilitating entry to the public sphere for ordinary people. However, relatively little attention has been paid to the role of talkback in constituting Australian identity, both nationally and culturally. This chapter examines how listeners and callers to a variety of talkback programmes construct theirs and other people's identity both culturally and nationally through talkback. We are interested in how some groups are included and others excluded from the construction of Australianness in many mainstream populist commercial talkback spaces. This research reveals that talkback radio, regardless of its provenance,

provides a homeland and heartland for its audiences and a space where they perform their national and cultural identities with varying effects.

In the rest of this chapter we continue to examine the literature in the field of talkback radio, focusing on the small body of Australian research around talkback radio's role in identity creation and its role in creating community. The latter area is important in relation to 'Australianness' by audiences of various talkback radio programmes. We are also fascinated by the ways in which audiences of alternative talkback use those spaces to construct an Australian identity that is seemingly at odds with the construction of Australianness in many mainstream populist commercial talkback spaces. This research reveals that talkback radio, regardless of its provenance, provides a homeland and heartland for its audiences and a space where they perform their national and cultural identities with varying effects.

In the rest of this chapter we continue to examine the literature in the field of talkback radio, focusing on the small body of Australian research around talkback radio's role in identity creation and its role in creating community. The latter area is important in relation to the title of this chapter-in that talkback radio is a homeland and heartland for audiences who see themselves, at least in relation to the issues of national and cultural identity, as belonging to a likeminded community. We then explore several of the key themes that emerged from the research, concluding with some thoughts about how talkback radio might respond to the challenges it faces.

Talkback formats and role

Talkback radio has the power to fascinate and infuriate in equal measures. Much of the research on Australian talkback radio has, as Turner indicates, failed to distinguish between the various talkback formats, programming styles and audiences. Styles, formats, content and priorities of talkback shows vary enormously. Turner's criticism of existing research for its categorisation of a wide range of talk back formats as 'populist', and the resultant assumptions about listeners, is of particular interest to us. Aspects of our research involve talkback spaces beyond the usual shock-jock programmes and, thus, our study breaks new ground for Australian academic investigation of talkback. Just as Botes and Langdon discovered in their study, we have also found that, in Australia, there are significant differences between commercial, community and public radio stations in the ways in which talkback hosts/presenters act and interact with callers and guests. These differences also extend to the demographics of the audiences they attract. Talkback radio is often thought to be the domain of the commercial sector, and Adams and Burton suggested that commercial talkback in Australia is dominated by economic imperatives and that while it is a 'legitimate and valuable avenue of debate in a healthy democracy' it exists to sell. However, there is a thriving talkback sector that has largely stayed off researchers' radars because it occurs in areas outside the more obvious populist programme formats. While some of this type of talkback is located within the commercial sphere, much of it can be found in non-commercial spaces, such as the ABC, SBS and community radio. It is here in these spaces that audiences who might be otherwise disenfranchised by

commercial talkback are negotiating their own use of the sphere and creating their own understandings about their national and cultural identities afforded via the socio-cultural connectedness and public performance opportunities created by talkback radio.

Talkback radio and community

Although Fitzgerald and Housley suggest that talkback radio audiences constitute a public within the public sphere, a better understanding of audiences, particularly in light of the diversity of audiences, programme formats and content examined here, can be gained by viewing them as constituting a series of 'publics' within the multitude of public spheres. In coming together within a talkback radio space, audience members form their own communities. While they are communities that people enter and leave at will, some people remain fiercely loyal, even territorial, towards their particular talkback community. The growing importance and popularity of talkback may also be due to increasing uncertainty about the ability of journalist-dominated formats to address the concerns of their audiences and those of their communities, whether they be geographically located or communities of interest.

The concept of talkback radio audiences as communities is not a new one—a decade ago Kane suggested that talkback radio can be seen as both a form of resistance and as an attempt to create a community. He described it as providing the chance for people to express their thoughts and outrages, and to have those validated by other members of that particular talkback community. An audience for talkback radio or a 'community' of listeners is 'drawn together around the particular programme or host and articulated through the discourse between the host and callers'. Although it is an imagined community, it is aware of itself, recognises fellow members, engages in boundary maintenance and shares common knowledge. In doing so, it constitutes a form of non-traditional social network, which 'produces informal pressure to conform to group norms'. Thus, as Barker suggests, talkback radio can function to embolden those whose views conform to those of the host and the majority of callers and to potentially intimidate and lead minority callers to question their belief structures. While talkback's creation of common communities can be positive, it can also have extremely negative repercussions for some sections of the community, as we and others have discovered.

It is tempting to homogenise talkback callers, but as Adams and Burton show, there are distinctions between caller types. They broadly distinguish between callers who are *reinforcers* and those who are *challengers*, and they identify various subcategories of each. Regardless of which category a caller fits into, calling can be experienced as more therapeutic than threatening.

Countering dominant discourses

Talkback radio can also be viewed as a discursive practice with its own distinctive techniques of managing, controlling and, ultimately, creating specific forms of talk, reproducing social power relations and defining the boundaries of social identities. 19 It is possible to speak of talkback radio programmes as constituting a discursive world, a concept that draws attention to the limits of discourse and what can and cannot be said in order to maintain the consistency of the programme's identity.

According to Brand and Scannell, the discursive world

- has an inside and an outside which is known and understood by the audience who demonstrate, when they phone in, their knowledge and competence as they routinely reproduce not merely a particular discursive content but a communicative manner and style that embodies the show's ethos.

We are intrigued by the potential of talk back radio as a site to counter hegemonic discourse and to facilitate dialogue between competing 'publics'. Some scholars have explored this aspect of talkback and we want to further this investigation by examining how specific talkback spaces are being used to counter the dominant discourses around identity.

Higgins and Moss view talkback as a potentially counter-hegemonic discourse. They argue that it is 'one of the few ways people can find to give public expression to private and perhaps dissonant viewpoints in a culture saturated with approved meanings'. In a similar vein, Crisell suggests that the expressive phone-in 'gives the listener of minority or unorthodox views a chance to challenge or modify' the conventional wisdom to which radio talk frequently succumbs. In the context of a deeply divided society, such as that of Northern Ireland, Coleman suggests that talkback is of more than usual significance:

- If by talking on the radio publics can speak unto publics whom they would ignore if they lived in the next street, then phone-in programmes could be regarded as the basis of an authentic public sphere.

These conceptions of talkback are a long way from those that emphasise the power of hosts to impose, without resistance, their viewpoints and framings onto listeners of issues. In Australia, more research is needed to show the extent to which talkback programmes perform this role. Crisell and Higgins and Moss wrote about the potential of talkback as a conduit for dissident community opinion in the 1980s, an era in which radio was big business, with big personality talk stars underpinning ratings. The ideal of talkback as a potentially important democratising tool had not been seriously challenged at the time. In the case of Coleman's Northern Ireland example of talkback radio as a bridge-builder in a riven society, it may reflect the uniqueness of the particular programme and nature of the divided society from which the callers were drawn. Whatever the case may be, these observations reflect the view of talkback as a type of liberal pluralism, whereby the host 'permits a diversity of opinion to be broadcast' without substantially stamping their authority onto the discussion. Lee suggests that in Australia this form of talkback is more likely to be found on the ABC than commercial stations, although even the ABC filters talkback calls. Nonetheless, on this point, in contrasting the deliberative processes she observed as taking place on John Faine's morning programme on the ABC (Melbourne) with the kind of 'moral panic' that is common in commercial talkback radio, Lee argues that:

There is an urgent need for future research to analyse the different iterations of talk radio in order to assess the degree to which different formats and different presenters are capable of making a contribution to democratic deliberation and debate.

Lunt and Stenner note that research on talk shows has moved beyond the abstract concerns of public-sphere theory and towards a more detailed analysis of the performative aspects of talk shows and their role as 'vehicles for the expression of everyday experiences and marginal voices'. In this context, rather than evaluate talk shows as potential public spheres, we must recognise that while they do constitute an institutionally constrained space, they also provide the opportunity for the expression of marginal voices that would not otherwise be heard in public. And this has particular resonance in a multicultural society, post-September 11, where Muslim voices have become increasingly represented as homogenised and hostile in the mainstream media.

Identity and race

In recent years, researchers have turned their attention to issues of identity in talkback radio discourse, particularly in the aftermath of the Cronulla riots. Those events, and the subsequent debate about them on talkback radio, offer a very clear illustration of how discussion around issues of national and cultural identity unfold in some talkback spaces-sometimes with social unrest and upheaval, rather than social cohesion, as a consequence. Research has focused on the causes, manifestations and consequences of the riots, and the role of shock-jocks Steve Price and Alan Jones in fanning the violence on radio stations 2UE and 2GB respectively. Poynting describes Alan Jones's involvement in the events around Cronulla thus:

- Right-wing talkback radio commentator Alan Jones read out the same text message during his high-ratings breakfast programme on the commercial 2GB station, beginning with 'Come to Cronulla this weekend to take revenge' and responding to calls from racist vigilantes with approbation. In fact, when the campaign to 'reclaim' Cronulla beach was burgeoning during the week after the assault on the lifesavers, his instinct for self-promotion led him boastfully to remind his audience: 'I led the Charge.'

While the role of talkback hosts in instigating violence within audiences is important, the talkback discussions about national and cultural identity that occurred in the days leading up to, during and after the riots reveal much about the way in which talkback audiences constitute their identity within that space. During the Cronulla riots, talkback callers and, as we found in this research, passive listeners to talkback, not only used the space to discuss issues around national identity and belonging, but they also used it to construct identity, in particular an 'Australianness' that some talkback callers to 2GB associated with whiteness. Kendrick identified several themes to emerge from the on-air comments of Jones and his callers and the 'way in which they attempt to manage Australian space and dictate what Australian identity looks like'. She argues that: 'The major defining factor of Jones and his callers is their investment in their own whiteness, and their conflation of Australian-ness with whiteness'. Mickler identified another aspect of talkback radio common to populist formats: the use of the space to create 'moral panics'. He identified that these talkback radio programmes frequently targeted racial and ethnic minorities, youths and criminals in order to create moral panics.

Hosts of the shock-jock persuasion often have a field day when these categories merge, further inflaming their generally high levels of outrage to proportions that extend their target range to include any individuals defending the rights of groups implicated.

Paradoxically, highly paid talkback presenters such as Jones and Price are able to exploit the egalitarian ethos associated with Australian identity by engaging with 'ordinary callers' and elevating them to the status of so-called 'experts'. Through this process, they pit themselves against the political or intellectual 'elite' and align themselves with 'Aussie battlers' in the audience. Mickler notes the irony of this in light of the 'Cash for Comment' inquiry findings, and the ease with which these same hosts who claim to speak for 'battlers' align themselves with the political and business elite when it suits their purposes. In regards to broadcasters such as Alan Jones, Mickler says:

- Regardless of whether any of them ever were, none of these presenters is currently a member of the 'battler' class on whose behalf they routinely claim to interrogate elite privilege and power. That this should be so obvious but seldom pointed out to listeners by other public figures remains one of the mysteries, if not failures, of Australian critical public comment and journalism.

This would suggest that talkback hosts tread a fine, sometimes even duplicitous line, as they attempt to advocate for ordinary Australians against political and commercial interests. But as we have seen in the Cronulla riots and other incidents, hosts often make determinations as to who they think is an ordinary Australian and, indeed, who they think qualifies as Australian.

Methodology

The data for this chapter was drawn from the first stage of a study of talkback radio callers and listeners to six stations around Australia. Speaking with listeners and callers to stations was considered to be the most productive way of exploring the concept of talkback radio as a homeland and heartland for its audiences. We chose to use focus groups with audiences to gather the data because this approach provides a way of exploring a specific set of issues with a particular group of people. We wanted to explore the very specific issue of how the talkback radio space is used by listeners and callers to formulate their ideas about themselves, their identity and that of others who use talkback spaces. One of the most valuable aspects of the discussion group approach is that, while it enables the exploration of broad issues, it also allows participants to 'generate their own questions, frames and concepts and to pursue their own priorities on their own terms, in their own vocabulary'. Because of the aim of the study and the type of people who would be likely to be attracted to participate those engaging in or listening to talkback programmes-it was important to provide them with a space in which they could speak freely about issues around identity and the meaning of the talkback space to them. Because the methodology involved self-selection or self-nomination for participation, it was not our intention to achieve a statistically representative sample of each station's audience for involvement in the discussion groups.

Indeed, the limitations on available methods for recruiting participants makes it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to ensure discussion groups are statistically representative of an audience. Rather, the discussion group approach is aimed at drawing on a range of participants whose make-up is intended to reflect the diversity of the audience. The themes and concepts that come out of a discussion group are also intended to be indicative, rather than statistically representative, of the types of ideas and responses of audiences of each station in relation to the themes discussed.

As this project was about reporting diversity, we wanted to ensure that the sample of stations was also varied and we were particularly mindful of Turner's admonishment that some Australian research has tended to label talkback as populist. We therefore sought stations that were reflective of the broad nature of talkback. The selection of stations included 2CC, a commercial station in Canberra, 666 ABC in Canberra, 5AA, a commercial station in Adelaide, 4BC, a commercial station located in Brisbane, 2MFM, a community radio station in Bankstown Sydney, whose audience consists of Muslims and non-Muslims living in that area, and the SBS Arabic programme. This selection represented a range of different styles and formats of talkback. We included the latter station and programme because we wanted to explore the ways in which specific cultural and religious groups are using alternative talkback spaces. The case of the Cronulla riots and the contribution made by Alan Jones through talkback, which is believed to have inflamed the riots, also prompted us to include the latter two groups-2MFM and the SBS Arabic programme. These programmes have largely Muslim audiences and we wanted to explore the ways in which talkback radio spaces have been, and are being, used by Muslims to conceptualise their identity and respond to divisive community events. In this chapter, we mainly focus on the discussion that emerged from 2CC, 2MFM and the SBS Arabic programme because they highlight the issues we wish to explore here.

We used the radio stations to recruit participants for our discussion groups through regular free-to-air community service announcements (CSAs). The announcements provided a brief outline of the project and gave listeners a 1800 number to call so they could register their interest in participating in a discussion group. Although we recognise that self-selection of focus-group participants can be problematic, one of the benefits of this form of recruitment is that those who nominate are particularly interested in, and passionate about, talkback radio. People who registered were contacted by the researchers and details were provided to them about the time and location of the discussion group that was being held for the particular station or programme to which they listened. Once a maximum of 15 people had registered for a discussion group we ceased the radio announcements. Each of the discussion groups had between six and 20 participants and they lasted for between one and-a-half and two hours. We established some general themes from which the discussion progressed and participants were also free to bring up issues as they felt appropriate. Meadows et al. (2007) used a similar approach in their study of community broadcasting audiences.

Homeland and heartland: Is talkback radio a space for like-minded people?

Our discussions with audience members of the six talkback stations delivered a wealth of data about the participants' ideas in relation to the 'ownership' of the talkback space, how they used it and who they considered had the right to access that space. Attitudes varied across the different audience groups but they were, at least in part, influenced by listening to and engaging with talkback that occurred around topics associated with national and cultural identity. Their comments about the Cronulla riots provided some fascinating insights into the broader issue of the impact of talkback radio on audiences' conceptualisation of 'Australianness' and cultural identity. There was also discussion about how callers to talkback programmes should act if they are to be included in the communities that spring up within and around particular programmes. Just as some talkback radio spaces provide a place where people are able to conceptualise their identity, culturally and politically, and share in a common discussion around these issues, tensions also arise in other talkback spaces over the very same issues, in particular the idea of what it is to be Australian, who is Australian and when they are Australian. During our discussions with talkback radio audience members of 2CC, a commercial radio station in Canberra, the issue of 'ownership' of the talkback space was raised. 2CC networks its talkback from 2UE, the station on which talkback radio shock-jock Steve Price broadcasts. The 'ownership' discussion occurred in the context of conversation about the Cronulla riots in 2005. We unpack this particular issue because it is illustrative, not only of the tensions that arise in the talkback space and how audiences deal with those tensions, but also of an otherwise unidentified aspect of audiences' interaction with and conceptualisation of talkback radio spaces. There were eight participants in the 2CC discussion group and several issues emerged from discussions with them. The first was the role of talkback in explaining multiculturalism to audiences and the associated issues of what it means to be Australian. In the case of the Cronulla riots, the 2CC audience members we spoke to said talkback hosts positioned that event as resulting from Australia's policy of multiculturalism. One participant commented: And I think the talkback voice really alerted the Australian people to see, well this multiculturalism, is it working?

Discussion about the behaviour of members of particular sections of the community followed this statement, with comments centring on participants' concepts of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, and by extension, what it meant to be Australian. One participant raised the issue of gang rapes perpetrated by Australians of Lebanese descent living in Sydney. She labelled the Lebanese community's reaction to the rapes as 'unacceptable'. In particular, she cited these events and the Cronulla riots as a public-relations disaster for the Lebanese community and said the Lebanese community should have 'all been quiet', while concurrently arguing that they should have publicly stated that the events were 'terrible' and disapproved of by the community. The irony of this double-bind was lost on the participant.

Discussion then turned to what the participants labelled as the 'colonisation' of their talkback radio space during the Cronulla riots by Lebanese people. The labels applied by participants to those who they considered had wrongly (in their views) 'colonised' the talkback space were also revealing. Discussion group participants most frequently referred to these 'colonisers' as Lebanese; only one participant identified them as Lebanese-Australian. This provided a deep insight into the views of the 2CC audience group

participants as to who had the right to speak, and subsequently be heard, within the station's talkback space. Participants viewed the space as theirs and they were concerned that it had been used by Lebanese during the Cronulla riots, for purposes that the participants regarded as being at odds with the spirit and style of that talkback platform. For these audience members, there was a distinct link between issues around turf and ownership of the talkback space and their ideas about who could rightly be considered to be an Australian. For this group, the latter identity was in part determined by the attitudes displayed by callers to the issues being discussed, which were, at that point in time, those of national identity, ethnicity, violence and crime. Issues around national and cultural identity and this audience group's perception that the two were incompatible with each other were highlighted by a lengthy exchange between participants. The 2CC audience members began by saying that during the Cronulla riots 'Lebanese' callers to 2CC's sister station 2UE (some 2UE programmes are syndicated on 2CC) behaved in a tribal manner. The participant explained:

- They were all a minority, they got in the radio, they said what they felt, defending their own positions, it didn't seem to promote understanding or acceptance or tolerance. After all the huffing and puffing, they just went back to their own corner.

This concerned participants because they believed the callers had only identified themselves as Lebanese and that they should firstly be Australian and identify with a specifically Australian cultural identity. When asked if the participants thought white Australians expected ethnic groups to have one good collective view on issues such as the Cronulla riots and Australianness, one participant responded that people in Australia were very tolerant and if individuals did their jobs properly everybody would accept them. This was then followed by the comment:

- I think there is a collective view from the ethnic Australians, if that's what you want to call them, their collective view is that they will come here and do whatever the hell they want and we'll put up with it.

And another participant in the same group:

- Well, yeah, you came here to this country, these are the laws, this is the way we live, if you don't like it ...

While none of the participants making these comments identified as being of any specific ethnic background, they had no trouble identifying a collective view that they thought ethnic groups expressed through talkback radio. This was viewed as a problem by participants who were disgruntled that during the Cronulla riots 'Lebanese' listeners rang the station and, according to several participants, expressed a collective view about the Cronulla riots that was at odds with the broader audience's view about that issue.

However, a very different perspective on the discussion in talkback around Cronulla and identity was provided by a participant in the 4BC discussion group. He identified himself as being of Indian ethnicity and described being frightened at mainstream talkback around issues of race. He explained:

- I really got scared when John Laws occasionally made what I thought were racist comments, not racist but he seemed to inflame people into calling in and I thought that did a lot of misinformation so I tried to call in.

He said commercial talkback, in particular the John Laws programme, created associations between Muslims, terrorism and Indians and that concerned him.

So, I was really worried when that happened [Laws talking about Muslims being terrorists] because it really did impact on me. It impacted on my children. So I had to, I did call in several times to make sure ... to try and get my ten cents and say hey, listen, balance your view. The bad thing was he used to inflame the situation. At the end of the day, he'd actually go and say you know, not all Muslims are bad [but] hey, you've already lit the fire ... I feel that he did, he did inflame the situation, he really needed tempering, I was scared of him.

And later in the discussion he made the following comment about how John Laws' comments on Muslims affected him: [When] he spoke up, I was petrified, I used to switch it off, switch off the radio when he was on because I just felt he was so unfair and if he did it to one group he probably would have done it in the past. I've only been in Australia for the past five years ... But that was my worry that was why I called.

While the 4BC listener was concerned about the impact of populist talkback programmes on Australia's social cohesiveness, 2CC audience members we spoke to viewed these programmes as providing 'authentic Australians' (i.e. white Australians) with an outlet through which they could 'let off steam' about particular issues.

When asked if they had called the station during the riots to make comment, a discussion ensued about the sensitivity of some topics on talkback and the fear that if participants called to comment they would be labelled racists. The same participants expressed no such concern about labelling Australians of Lebanese ancestry in similar ways. The following discussion revealed participants' concerns that if they called talkback radio about certain issues, labels would be applied to them:

Facilitator. These are obviously things that have got people really fired up, really passionate. Have any of you called in about these issues on talkback radio?

*P1:*No.

*P2:*No.

Facilitator. Why not? What would hold you back?

P1: I just wouldn't comment on it, fear of being a racist or fear of retribution or ...

P2: You will just be labelled a racist.

However, there were some racially/culturally sensitive issues that, if discussed on talkback radio, would prompt participants to call up. One participant mentioned a letter that had been published by the *Canberra Times*. The letter referred to a debate that was taking place in England where Muslims had (purportedly) asked to ban hotcross buns because the cross on food offended them. She described that as being 'over the top'. Her comments were followed by this remark from another participant:

P1: If it got to the point of that I would ring up then, but I wouldn't just ring up to say [just anything].

Although some participants clearly felt they were no longer able to give voice to their feelings about sensitive issues on talkback radio, the above comment and responses to it indicates that the nature of the topic would grant them leeway to engage in discussion about it via talkback, regardless of the risk of being labelled racist.

Minority responses to populist talkback

The diversity of Australia's alternative talkback spaces has yet to be fully mapped, but our discussions with audience members of the SBS Arabic programme and 2MFM audiences revealed the importance of these spaces to their respective audiences. Indeed, while commercial talkback, such as that provided by Alan Jones and Steve Price, might provide a homeland for audiences such as those that tune in to 2CC, alternative spaces like 2MFM and the SBS Arabic programme provide an important space for their respective audiences to conceptualise their identity as Australians. While both 2MFM and the SBS Arabic programme had an important role in helping participants maintain their language, much of the discussion among 2MFM participants centred on the station's role in forming their identity as Australians. At 2MFM, participants talked about how they were first and foremost Australians and how that identity took precedence over the national, cultural or religious identity they carried as a result of their birthplace, ethnicity or faith. Talkback on this radio station contributed to the formation of the discussion of group participants' identity as Australians by helping them understand and enact good citizenship. A male participant explained that the station promoted involvement in the community and he gave the following example of how it did that:

They [the station] tell you about exercise, all sorts of things, cholesterol level exercise, and good citizenship and no trouble [that it's important not to cause trouble]. [The station tells you to] help people, we go [to] hospitals, we go [to] jails, and there's good humanitarian help especially.

The ideas expressed by this participant about what it means to be Australian are in stark contrast to those voiced by 2CC participants. Within the spaces provided by talkback on 2MFM, much time was devoted to creating an Australian identity for audiences, particularly newly arrived immigrants that was tied to being a good citizen. And it was not just those who had recently arrived in Australia who were benefiting from talkback about citizenship and Australian identity. Another participant explained the station was helping young Muslims to fulfill their potential and get involved in the community and to effect change where it was needed.

A similar theme emerged in discussions with the SBS Arabic programme, which was helping members of the Lebanese community to obtain information about life in Australia. A participant in this discussion group said the Arabic programme provided important information and perspectives on how to deal with difficult aspects of life in Australia such as cultural conflict. He said:

But there is, in Arabic programme, always they chat with the some Arabic community leaders, like in Victoria they are very active in doing courses for Arabic speaking women, how to raise your kids, how to deal with them, stuff like that and how to deal with conflict of culture, stuff like that so I live it [these experiences], I love that.

2MFM was also playing an important role for the audience members we spoke to in providing a moderate view of Islam. One participant said:

I like to listen to this radio station for a variety of reasons. I like the religious programmes because they give me true pure information about Islam away from extremism. This radio station is positive against extremism daily because there are a lot of people out there who have given the Muslims a bad name through their bad actions, evil actions. Some bad elements are trying to get our kids and try and teach them to do the bad things. This radio station is giving young people the right way and how to treat others. This is our country and we have to work together to protect it. We are like people who travel in a ship, if we let the evil people do the wrong things on the ship then we are all going to drown but if we stop them and get rid of them then we will all be safe. This is part of our religion and how to defend our country. This is not true what some terrorists portray ...

Radio station 2MFM and the SBS Arabic radio programme provide two examples of radio that is culturally appropriate and relevant to sections of Australia's diverse multicultural communities. Meadows, Forde, Ewart and Foxwell's exploration of community radio ethnic-language programmes revealed the importance audiences placed on these programmes in respect of their role in

maintaining languages and cultures.⁴³ Audience members we spoke to from ZMFM and SBS said religion, politics and other sensitive issues were handled by presenters and guests with sensitivity, but they were also made relevant to the audiences.

Discussions with Arabic-speaking audiences of 2MFM and the SBS Arabic programme revealed that these talkback spaces provide them with an alternative to mainstream talk back. The aforementioned spaces are ones in which they are able to discuss a variety of issues, from the personal to the political, in rational ways. Interestingly, in their discussions about the Cronulla riots, ZCC listeners indicated that while talkback on their station had previously provided them with a space in which they felt safe to air their feelings and emotions on issues of identity and multiculturalism, this seemed to change after the Cronulla riots in connection with sensitivities over being labelled a racist. What is also significant is that ZCC appeared to have been, at least prior to the Cronulla riots, providing a space that its audience saw as culturally relevant to them. Although that space may not be culturally relevant to some or indeed reflective of Australia's diverse population, it was replicating an Australian identity that the audience members we spoke to identified with.

Audiences said the talkback programmes on SBS and ZMFM encouraged interactions between Muslim and non-Muslim communities, but given the fact that the majority of the station's audience is Muslim, it is worth questioning whether, and to what extent, a similar message is getting through to the non-Muslim communities and, if so, where and how. Although audience members we spoke to who listen to ZMFM, and to a lesser extent the Arabic language programme on SBS, believe the stations/programmes played a role in promoting interaction between Muslim and non-Muslim communities, a more thorough investigation is needed to determine the extent to which these stations/programmes encourage and facilitate those interactions. It also appears that while these two talkback programmes draw on experts from within and without their specific communities, whether they be religious or ethnic communities, and in the case of 2MFM attract non-Muslim and non-Arabic speakers, the same level of cross-fertilisation between communities was not identified by audiences of mainstream talkback radio who participated in this study.

Responding to the challenges

The responses of the audience members we spoke with reveal much about the dilemmas, difficulties and benefits associated with talkback discussions around topics about identity and belonging across the different formats of talkback radio. These are topics that some audiences see as sensitive, but others embrace as they struggle and strive to learn what it means to be Australian and to make links to broader Australian society. The contrasts between the audiences of the SBS Arabic programme and ZMFM, and those of ZCC audiences are stark. The ZCC audience group participants responded to the discussions around identity, racism and sensitive topics that occurred in the talkback radio space with trepidation-at times they admitted they were afraid to engage with them in case they were labelled racists. They also described feeling miffed that their talkback space had been, in one seminal instance involving discussions about identity, colonised by people they considered did not have the right to access that space and whom they largely described as 'un-Australian'. By contrast, the SBS Arabic programme and community radio station ZMFM have

responded to the challenges and limitations of populist talkback formats by creating talkback programming that those we spoke to describe as meaningful, useful and community building.

Although that style of talkback provides a counter to dominant discourses around religion and ethnicity, it does so within a limited space and to specific audiences-to resort to cliché it may be a case of 'preaching to the converted'. We recognise that in the case of ZMFM there is, however, anecdotal evidence to suggest that non-Muslims are listening to the station's talkback and occasionally engaging with it. For example, participants were keen to point out that non-Muslim shopkeepers in Bankstown (a Western Sydney suburb with a significant Muslim population in which 2MFM's studios reside) play 2MFM in their premises.

In exploring the responses of some members of talkback radio communities to the problematic nature of discourses about national and cultural identities in mainstream commercial and non-commercial talkback radio, this chapter has revealed that while talkback radio is being used as a site to negotiate national and cultural identities, there are inherent contradictions and difficulties in that process. Our study has shown that for at least two groups of Australian Muslims, non-commercial talkback radio spaces are providing mechanisms that they are using to integrate into Australian society. So, to some extent, populist versions of commercial talkback that do not afford such access and efforts by migrant populations to integrate may be being countered by these alternative talkback spaces. While the SBS and 2MFM audience group participants felt a strong connection to the stations and programmes and collectively discussed the value of the spaces provided in allowing members of their respective communities to engage in discussion and debate, they also appreciated the fact that anyone could speak in that space. Participants in these groups respected the spaces created by the talkback they listened to and appreciated the debates and disagreements that transpired. Unlike the commercial and public radio group participants we spoke to, they weren't just listening to hear like-minded people's opinions.

Our research indicates that talkback being created and engaged with by Australian Muslims is helping to form and validate their experiences, knowledge capital and identities, both culturally and nationally. It is in these talkback spaces that they are reaching out to and connecting with sections of the broader Australian community. For newly arrived immigrants, this talkback programming facilitates and assists their settlement experiences and inclusion in Australian society. For those who have been settled for some time, and those who were born in Australia but identify with culturally and linguistically diverse communities, talkback assists their social inclusion and, perhaps most importantly, helps them conceptualise their identity as Australians.

In examining the ways that various audiences conceptualise cultural identity and cultural diversity through talkback radio spaces, this research has identified a significant issue. Although talkback spaces exist where Muslim communities form their national identity and those programmes and stations help to form links between their primary audiences and other sections of Australian society, there appear to be few spaces where the reverse is happening via mainstream talkback radio. The commercial talkback callers we spoke to appeared either to largely avoid dealing with culturally sensitive issues, or when they did engage with these issues, it resulted in a ghettoisation of national and cultural identity within the talkback space. While 'populist' commercial talkback

does this as part of its style and format, talkback that avoids sensitive issues and largely ignores or avoids callers with strong accents is seen by some of its listeners as just as problematic. This point is illustrated by the following exchange between participants in a discussion group with listeners to Adelaide's 5AA:

P1: And people with accents too, if they speak on air, they're harder to understand.

P2: [They are] Harder to understand

P1: Now Tommy has got more of an accent on radio than he has in person and some of them with really strong accents, they have to speak really slowly and sometimes you don't understand them.

Australia has an increasingly diverse population and talkback, regardless of the format, may need to engage with these wider audiences to ensure its long-term survival and prosperity in the context of diminishing audiences for mainstream and traditional media. Forming connections between communities is a challenge that some styles of talkback are rising to, as is evident in the 2MFM example. There is much potential for commercial talkback stations to capitalise on the diversity of the Australian audience and, in the process, to broaden the types of issues discussed in the talkback space, and the ways in which they are handled. As Australia's population increasingly diversifies, it will be imperative for talkback radio programmes to address the issue of the range of voices represented in the discussions and conversations that occur in the broader community.

Our research has revealed the role of talkback radio programmes in helping Australians to conceptualise their identity and facilitate discussions around issues of cultural diversity. It has revealed some of the limitations that audiences put on who can be considered to be Australian and under what circumstances. It has also shown that Muslim communities have been proactive in creating spaces where they can engage in discussion about what it means to be Australian in spaces that are culturally relevant and safe, while still allowing discussion and debate about these issues and facilitating another form of deliberative democracy. Discussions with Muslim focus group participants reveal the problematic nature of some commercial talkback radio programmes' representation of Muslims. The following comment from a 2MFM participant was made in reference to the representation of Muslims in mainstream talkback radio programmes:

While it does give out the wrong picture that people say Muslims are locking themselves behind closed doors, they don't want to integrate, they don't wannabe part of society and that's totally a false issue, I can assure you that a lot in our community are open-minded people, they're more than willing to integrate with other cultures and the radio station has helped in a lot of ways.

What is interesting and worthy of further investigation is how the commercial talkback setting could be used in similar ways, because it largely appears either to avoid discussions about issues that may be considered too 'sensitive', or when it does engage

with issues surrounding religion and cultural diversity, there is, as research has shown, a tendency to engage in negative and potentially harmful ways. While alternative talkback is playing an important role for its audiences, the potential of mainstream commercial and ABC talkback to foster an appreciation of the diverse nature of the Australian population and fostering cross-cultural communication largely remains untapped.

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Notes (see Published version for complete references cited within published chapter)

1 Adams and Burton, Talkback.

2 This study is part of a national project called 'Reporting diversity'. The project was originally called 'Journalism in multicultural Australia' but with the completion of the project and the re-election of the Howard government amidst racially charged politics, the next phase of the project was called 'Reporting diversity and integration'. Since the election of the Labor government the word 'Integration' has been dropped from the project and it is now named 'Reporting diversity'. Despite some difficulties and controversy surrounding the nature and methodology for the project, which were related to the incumbent government at the time, the project topic was established in mid-2007 and fieldwork for the study began in April 2008. In May 2008, additional funding was announced for an expansion of the national project and the talkback radio study received a small financial boost.

3 Adams and Burton, Talkback, pp. 102-104; Mickler, 'Talkback radio, anti-elitism and moral decline', pp. 29-45.

4 Adams and Burton, Talkback, pp. 102-04.

5 Flew, 'Down bylaws', pp. 10-15.

6 Fitzgerald and Housley, 'Talkback, community and the public sphere', pp. 150-63.

7 Poynting, 'What caused the Cronulla riot?', pp. 85-92; Kendrick, 'I'm the one that's lead *[sic]* this charge'.

8 Turner, 'Some things we should know about talkback radio', pp. 73-80.

9 Turner, Tomlinson and Pearce, 'Talkback radio', pp. 107-19.

10 Botes and Langdon, 'Public radio talk show hosts and social conflict', pp. 266-86.

11 Adams and Burton, p. x.

12 Fitzgerald and Housley, 'Talkback, community and the public sphere'.

13 Davis and Curtice, 'Speaking for the public', pp. 62-77.

14 Kane, 'Public argument, civil society and what talk radio teaches about rhetoric'.

15 Fitzgerald and Housley, 'Talkback, community and the public sphere', p.153.

16 Barker, 'The talk radio community', p. 261.

- 17 Poynting, 'What caused the Cronulla riot?'; ABC T1, *Four Corners*, 'Riot and revenge'; Kendrick, 'I'm the one that's lead [sic] this charge'.
- 18 Adams and Burton, Talkback.
- 19 Cook, 'Dangerously radioactive', pp.59-80; Hilmes, 'Rethinking radio', pp. 1-19; Tebbutt, 'Hanging her laundry in public', pp. 108-21.
- 20 Brand and Scannell, 'Talk, identity and performance', pp. 201-26.
- 21 Ibid., p. 204
- 22 Higgins and Moss, *Sounds real*, p. 1; Crisell, *Understanding Radio*, p 184; Coleman, 'BBC Radio Ulster's talkback phone-in', p.10.
- 23 Higgins and Moss, *Sounds Real*, p. 1.
- 24 Crisell, *Understanding Radio*, p. 184.
- 25 Coleman, 'BBC Radio Ulster's talkback phone-in', p. 10.
- 26 Potts, *Radio in Australia*, p. 127.
- 27 Lee, 'The 'two-sided' medium', p. 117.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 Lunt and Stenner, 'The Jerry Springer show as an emotional public sphere', p. 63.
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 Poynting, 'What caused the Cronulla riot?', p. 87.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Kendrick, 'I'm the one that's lead [sic] this charge', p. 14.
- 34 Ibid., p. 12.
- 35 Mickler, 'Talkback radio, anti-elitism and moral decline', pp. 29-45.
- 36 Mickler, 'Talkback radio, anti-elitism and moral decline'.
- 37 See the cash for comment report at the ACMA website www.acma.gov.au/WEB/STANDARD/pc=PG_310821
- 38 Mickler, 'Talkback radio, anti-elitism and moral decline', p. 36.
- 39 Kitzinger and Barbour, 'Introduction: The challenge and promise of focus groups', p. 4.
- 40 Ibid., p. 5.
- 41 Ibid., p. 7.
- 42 Turner, 'Some things we should know about talkback radio'.
- 43 Meadows, et al., *Community Media Matters*.