

**Talkback Radio: An emotional homeland and heartland**  
**A study of some Australian talkback radio audiences**  
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## Contents

1. Executive Summary	3-4
2. Study Aims and Objectives	5
3. Background	6-8
4. Design and Methodology	9-11
5. Findings	
5.1 To Gain a Sense of Community	12-17
5.2 For Company and Therapy	18-20
5.3 News and Information	21
5.31 Hyper-Local News	21-25
5.32 News from Home	26-30
5.4 Talkback Radio and Democracy	31-32
5.5 The Power of Talkback Radio	32-35
5.6 Having Access to Politicians and Engaging with Politics	36-42
5.7 Talkback Radio as a Lobbying Tool	43-45
5.8 Talkback Radio as Problem Solver	45-47
5.9 Talkback Radio as a Form of Citizen Journalism	48-52
5.10 Talkback Callers as News Sources	53-57
5.11 To Share Own and Opinion and Hear Others'	58-62
6. Agenda Setting	63-70
7. Cultural Diversity and Talkback	71-78
8. 'Other' Spaces and Places	78-82
9. Producers' roles – Gatekeepers or traffic cops	83-89
10. The Value of Talkback Radio	90-91
11. References and Further Reading	92-101

## 1. Executive Summary

This is the first Australian study to explore in detail the motivations of the people who listen to and call talkback radio. Talkback radio can be distinguished from other forms of radio by the presenters' invitation to members of the audience to actively participate in a program (Faine 2005). Audiences can phone in, send an SMS or email to the program, with their views, opinions or information.

Few Australian studies have focussed on talkback radio audiences and this report is to date the most extensive examination of Australian talkback radio audiences.

The Reporting Diversity project provided the impetus to examine talkback radio audiences' motivations for listening to and calling talkback radio programs. It also provided an opportunity to explore the unique and at times vexed interactions between talkback radio producers and audiences, from the perspectives of some audience members. Because talkback radio has been implicated as having a role in setting the news agenda, this study also provided an opportunity to explore audiences' perspectives on that issue.

The study involved 12 discussion groups with talkback radio audiences from three states and the ACT. More than 120 people participated in these groups and many others who were not able to attend the discussion groups spoke of the value of talkback radio to them.

This study found that while motivations for listening and calling were different for individuals, similarities were clearly identifiable across the audiences discussion groups in the study. This study identified that talkback radio performs a variety of roles for its audiences.

The key findings of the study were that:

1. Talkback radio programs provide a homeland and heartland for their audiences. The concept of talkback radio for many audiences is that of a homeland – a relatively safe space where audiences feel free to air their opinions. However, the ways in which audience members use these spaces to air their opinions are largely dependent on the format of the programs.
2. Talkback radio provides a space in which audiences conceptualise national identity, citizenship and belonging.
3. Multicultural Australia is engaging in discussion and debate about issues of concern and interest via talkback that has been created specifically for these audiences.
4. Talkback radio programs provide a number of other important and under recognised 'services' for their various communities of interest.
5. Talkback radio programs are an early and continuing form of citizen media, which participants often use to engage with democracy and democratic process.
6. Audience members recognise that some talkback radio plays a news agenda setting role, and can be critical of the ways in which this occurs.

7. Talkback radio producers use a variety of mechanisms to screen, control and facilitate callers, but callers have their own ways of subverting those tactics.

Talkback radio is a rich and still largely unexplored field of research. As the first study of Australian audiences' perceptions of the role and value of talkback radio, this study provides a fascinating insight into the ways in which audiences think about, talk about and engage with talkback.

## 2. Study Aims and Objectives

The following aims and objectives were established for the study.

**AIM:** This program seeks to equip journalism educators, students and practitioners with a mechanism for understanding the context of talkback radio, which is increasingly being used as a source of news, and its callers as a source of news talent. Further, it aims to provide journalism educators, students and practitioners with the means to facilitate more informed and balanced reporting of diversity; ensure balance in news reporting that uses talk-back radio and callers as news sources, with particular regards to ensuring such stories reflect balanced perspectives indicative of Australia's cultural and linguistic diversity.

**Objectives:** To provide context for, and a means of, informed and balanced news reporting reflecting the cultural and linguistic diversity of the Australian community, where talkback radio and its callers have become significant sources of news. This project will:

1. Identify, through a random sample and qualitative research, the reasons talkback callers express their views in this medium.
2. Seek to cluster these reasons into a taxonomy of purpose, identifying the different meanings that callers attach to this communication.
3. In so doing, provide the journalism community with a means of understanding and classifying TBR callers and views. Callers may engage with talk back radio for many disparate reasons – for example, comments on air may reflect more of an emotional response to an event or situation, and/or an off-the-cuff reaction, or a comment the caller would make at a pub, rather than if a journalist was sitting in front of them with a microphone and a camera.
4. Gather further information as to the perceived lack of culturally and linguistically diverse participant engagement in mainstream radio talkback. The project will seek an understanding from some of these communities as to if and how they participate as mainstream radio talkback callers. If, as anecdotal evidence suggests, the research indicates that their voices are not well represented in talkback radio, then the research will canvass culturally and linguistically diverse community members in order to ascertain where equivalent communication to that identified in the taxonomy identified above takes place. In so doing, the project provides a means to equip the journalism community to find culturally and linguistically diverse voices to balance the largely Anglo voices and views expressed in main stream talkback radio.
5. Finally the project will provide a means to inform culturally and linguistically diverse communities as to the context of TBR caller engagement and alert them to opportunities to create similar communication spaces easily accessible to the journalism community.

### 3. Background

Talkback radio has attracted relatively little interest from researchers. This makes it a fertile field of research and one that should continue to attract scholarly interest. There are some differences between ‘talk’ radio and ‘talkback’ radio (Faine, 2005). According to Faine (2005), the former refers specifically to a host interviewing a guest, whereas the latter refers to the host talking to callers with or without a guest. This distinction is not readily apparent in the literature where ‘talk’ radio is used to refer to phone-in programs that meet Faine’s definition of ‘talkback’ radio. It is important to recognise that ‘talkback’, as opposed to ‘talk’ radio, is a foreign concept in some parts of Europe (Faine, 2005) and would appear to be a reference to the genre that is generally used in Australia, New Zealand (see McGregor, 1996), some parts of Asia (see Fitzgerald, 2007), the United Kingdom and the United States of America. Talkback radio is used throughout this report to refer to radio programs in which people are invited to call in and discuss topics of their own choosing and/or in response to the topic established by the host, which is often related to news and current affairs of the day.

Numerous developments in technology, and subsequent regulations, have influenced and changed the shape and content of talkback radio. The first official talkback call in Australia was not made until 17 April 1967 (Gould, 2007), yet as early as 1925 radio station 2BL allowed telephone users to call and ask questions of the presenter with the question and answer being heard by listeners. This experiment violated Postmaster General (PMG) regulations prohibiting conversations between individuals by wireless (Johnson, 1988). Gould (2004) suggests the delay in the introduction of talkback radio in Australia, coming as it did over 20 years after developments in Britain and the United States, was a result of the cautious approach of the Australian Broadcasting Control Board (ABCB) and Post Office. The introduction and availability of the ‘beep-a-phone’ in 1964, which constituted a significant improvement in recording telephone conversations, alleviated some of the concerns of regulatory bodies (Gould, 2004). But it also brought new concerns for regulators in relation to not being able to control what was said and by whom in talkback (Gould, 2007). Gould (2007) says the fears of the ABCB reflected a belief that radio “should be used to inform rather than entertain” (p. 82).

Clearly then, talkback would not have been possible without the telephone and, more specifically, the informal use of it (O’Regan, 1992). Placing restrictions on the use of the telephone was, therefore, one of the means by which regulators delayed the introduction of talkback (Gould, 2004). In 1956 the introduction of another technology in the form of television meant that radio broadcasters had to find new formats in order to compete for audiences (Miller & Turner, 2002), and talkback radio was seen as one way of attracting audiences (Gould, 2004). Talkback was also a means by which radio could differentiate itself from television and, for radio stations, it was relatively cheap to produce (Griffen-Foley, 2004).

Social and cultural changes have also brought about changes in the way people engage with radio. According to Gould (2007), AM talkback radio strengthened in the

1990s as a result of an increasingly mobile audience, longer time spent commuting and an increase in mobile phone ownership. More recently, the ability to access radio on the Internet means that talkback is available to a much larger audience, thereby widening its participatory scope. Email and SMS technology makes talkback available to people who would not otherwise have contributed by calling a program (Gillman, 2007; see Thornborrow and Fitzgerald, 2002 for research on the phenomenon of emailed questions to radio phone-in programmes and Tacchi, 2000 for a discussion of internet radio). These developments also challenge our definitions of talk radio and what it means to participate.

The increasing popularity of talk radio has been linked to social factors such as growing numbers of unemployed and part-time and shift workers, and the ageing population, who are seen as influencing the main agendas of talk radio programs (Appleton, 1999). Mickler (2005) suggests the cultural power and political influence of populist talkback hosts has grown rapidly since the mid-1980s “in response to the industrial disenfranchisement and social insecurity that accompanied the rise of neo-liberal economic policies and globalisation in Australia” (p. 29). Turner says the increased commercial power of talkback hosts, such as John Laws and Alan Jones, has been one of the key shifts in radio from the late 1980s to the present (Radio National, 2003). This shift has brought with it new ethical considerations and debate about how the medium should be regulated. An area of particular concern has been the conduct of talkback hosts given their privileged position to influence public opinion and the loyalty they inspire in their listeners.

Unlike other media, radio is a *secondary* medium in that people can engage with it while they are doing other things, such as driving to work or cooking dinner (Crisell, 1986). This may help to explain why in the early days of radio in Australia it was assumed by broadcasters that listeners would be passive and privatised. Broadcasters were urged not to lecture to their listeners and there was a distinction between ‘highbrow’ and ‘lowbrow’ stations (Johnson, 1981). This latter division can be seen to loosely parallel that between public service and commercial radio in contemporary Australian society. For the most part though, radio has changed a great deal. The introduction of talkback, in particular, might well be seen as bringing about something of a revolution in the role of radio in society. It certainly constituted a major shift in expectations about the role of listeners away from passive receivers and towards active participants. The talkback format made it possible for, and perhaps even depended on, radio hosts to use the medium as a vehicle through which to lecture to listeners in a way that had earlier been discouraged. It is in this context that the following comment by Turner (2007, p. 77) resonates:

An historical overview of talkback...would encourage very different accounts to those that have been generated in response to its most recent formations.

Apart from growing scholarly interest and the growing popularity of talk radio in Australia, at least, an inquiry by the Australian Broadcasting Authority (ABA) into the conduct of some talkback radio hosts has been responsible for placing talkback radio firmly on the agenda of regulators, scholars, commentators, listeners and the wider public. To the extent that this has been perhaps the key event in the recent history of talkback in this country, a brief overview is provided before the role of talk radio hosts more generally is discussed.

Talkback radio's role in relation to the issue of diversity is a vexed one. It would be impossible not to mention talkback radio's role in the Cronulla riots, particularly in light of the aims of the Reporting Diversity project. The Cronulla riots provide a relatively recent example of the tendency of talkback hosts in Australia to create 'moral panics'. Kendrick (2006) examined the role of popular broadcaster Alan Jones and his callers in inflaming the 2005 Cronulla riots between young Lebanese-Muslim and Anglo-Australian men. She analysed his and his callers' opinions and, more broadly, talkback radio's claim to power and authority. Kendrick argues that it was the intimate relationship between Jones and his listeners/callers that made his program a "pivotal player" in the unfolding of the riots (p. 3). She 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" (p. 12). 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" (p. 14). Jones was found to have breached the commercial radio code of practice in broadcasts leading up to the riots (Lee, 2007b).

Another key incident in relation to talkback radio that requires mention is the 'cash for comment' scandal. The Commercial Radio Inquiry was established and undertaken by the ABA in 1999 to investigate claims that some of the country's most popular and highest paid talkback hosts had received payment from companies and lobby groups in return for positive comment (see ABA, 2000; Gordon-Smith, 2002). Dubbed 'cash for comment' Turner suggests that the 'scandal' can be seen as a consequence of the deregulation of the radio broadcasting industry formalised in the *Broadcasting Services Act* (1992). In particular, he argues that it highlighted the failure of self-regulation in commercial radio to protect the public interest (Turner, 2000).

One of the outcomes of the inquiry was that licensees be required to ensure the on-air disclosure of commercial agreements between sponsors and presenters. But the ABA was powerless to censure talkback hosts and so those who were found to breach the Commercial Radio Code of Practice continue to operate. Moreover, any concern that listeners had about the controversy was not reflected in ratings; listeners remained loyal to the hosts (Radio National, 2003). And, while research confirms that listeners believe it is important for presenters to disclose their personal sponsorship deals, they still find it difficult to discern whether their views are genuinely believed or influenced by the sponsor (ABA, 2003). It is interesting to note that the absence of quality control concerns of the kind that delayed the introduction of talkback is seen as having created the conditions for the cash for comment scandal (Turner & Cunningham, 2002).

Given the considerable political influence of talkback radio and its role in the above mentioned incidents, one of which was crucial in understanding the way talkback has the power to create division in society, the current study also examined how Australia's diverse communities are using and engaging with talkback.

#### **4. Design and Methodology**

This study set out to investigate and identify:

1. The motivations of those who listen to and call talkback radio and the role talkback radio plays for them.
2. The way specific types of talkback programs are used by various audiences to conceptualise their identity, nationally and culturally and the way that occurs in those spaces.
3. The manner in which producers conceptualise their roles, in particular the gate-keeping aspect of that role, and how audiences view and interact with producers.

The scope of the current study was established early in 2008 and fieldwork began in April, 2008. The project brief was to undertake six focus groups with talkback radio audiences, comprising talkback radio callers and listeners. In July 2008 the project was expanded and an additional six audience discussion were scheduled. The expansion also involved the addition interviews with producers of specific programs listened to by those who attended each of the focus groups. The research also explored the gate-keeping role of producers and audiences' interactions with producers. The study identified a number of radio stations around Australia, which hosted talkback radio programs. In exploring which radio stations and programs should be involved in the study, a variety of talkback radio program styles and formats were selected. The aim was to include a range of radio station audiences – commercial and non-commercial – in the project. Because much of the existing research has focussed on populist program formats and the study aimed to explore other forms of talkback in Australia, particularly where rational debate and discussion might occur, station selection was very important. Another aim was also to explore talkback that might be accessed by non-mainstream, ethnically diverse populations and it was important to include a mix of regional and metropolitan stations in the final sample. It was also necessary that stations were willing to assist in publicising the project (due to the limited budget and no budget for advertising). Time and financial limitations meant that it was not possible to include stations in several states. The final sample included Queensland, New South Wales, South Australia and the Australian Capital Territory. The aim was to hold a discussion group with audiences of talkback from one non-commercial metropolitan station, one commercial metropolitan station and one regional station from each of these states or territory. Of the regional station audiences included in the study, all listened to talkback on the ABC. A planned discussion group with ABC Rockhampton audiences was cancelled due to a lack of interest from potential participants. This may have been because it was scheduled three weeks prior to Christmas or it may be indicative of other issues with the particular audience.

Fieldwork for the project, including audience discussion groups and interviews with talkback radio program staff, was undertaken in two stages – the first in April 2008 and the second in October 2008 following the provision of additional funding for the research. The study also included two talkback programs aimed at multicultural audiences.

Discussion groups were held with audiences of the following stations and programs:

New South Wales

Sydney

- SBS Arabic Program
- 2MFM
- 2UE
- ABC

Lismore/Byron Bay

- ABC

South Australia

Adelaide

- 5AA
- ABC

Renmark

- ABC

Queensland

Brisbane

- 4BC
- ABC

ACT

Canberra

- 2CC
- ABC

Interviews were also held with some talkback radio program staff. They included the following production staff:

New South Wales

Sydney

- SBS Arabic Program – Majida Aboud Saab (also hosts the program)
- 2MFM – Faten el Dana (also hosts talkback programs on the station)
- 2UE – Darren Flynn and Sami Clare
- ABC – Rory MacDonald

Lismore/Byron Bay

- ABC –Nadine Maloney

South Australia

Adelaide

- 5AA – Adrian Middledorp
- ABC Sonya Feldhoff, Regan Pitt

Renmark

- ABC - Deborah O'Callaghan

Queensland  
Brisbane<sup>i</sup>

- ABC Simon Scobel

ACT  
Canberra

- 2CC Renee Konig
- ABC - Gabrielle Rumble and Nina Olley

The focus group approach was used to undertake an in-depth exploration of the issues identified for study (Kitzinger and Barbour, 1999: 4). This method enabled an in-depth exploration of a variety of themes and issues associated with talkback radio. It also meant participants could contribute on their own terms and they could raise issues that were not necessarily covered in the guiding themes developed for the group discussions. The focus group approach and the method of recruitment used to attract participants to the groups was not about achieving statistical representation of the audience. Rather, it meant the groups were made up of individuals who listened to talkback on the station targeted and those people had a particular interest in talkback. The interviews with radio station staff were semi-structured and were guided by a list of themes and questions. The in-depth nature of the interviews allowed the interviewees to raise issues and elaborate on points where they wanted to do so.

#### **4.2 Recruitment of participants**

Participant recruitment announcements via community service announcements were aired on each of the stations. The assistance of the stations in providing free air time for these announcements was greatly appreciated and contributed significantly to the success of the study. A 1800 number was provided as part of those announcements so that participants could register their interest in attending a discussion group. To ensure participant confidentiality, the 1800 number was managed and monitored by the Chief Investigator and stations did not have access to it or the names of those who attended the discussion groups.

Although self-nomination by focus group participants can be problematic, one benefit is that those who nominated were guaranteed to be particularly interested in talkback radio. Those who registered their interest in participating were contacted by the Chief Investigator and they were provided with details of the study. More than 100 calls were received from people who indicated their interest in participating, but who were unable to do so. Each discussion group had between six and 20 participants and lasted for between one-and-a-half to three hours. Some general themes were established for discussion and participants were also free to bring up issues.

In the case of 2MFM and SBS where some participants wanted to speak in Arabic, one of the other group participants interpreted the conversation.

## 5. The findings

### 5.1 To gain a sense of Community

“So sometimes it [listening] is a bit of wish or a bit of insight or something, but I just love it. That’s my community and that’s the swimming pool I choose to swim in. I just love the media.” ABC Brisbane focus group participant

The above quote from a participant in one of the discussion groups held to gather the data for this study is illustrative of what was perhaps the most common reason for listening to and calling talkback amongst the audience members involved in this study. The data show that overwhelmingly in this respect talkback radio is playing a vital and under-recognised role in the community. Participants reported that by listening to and participating in talkback they felt they were part of the community and that in turn gave them a sense of belonging. This was not simply a geographical community, although talkback’s role in providing information about local events was identified as important because it allowed people to join in these events if they wished, but perhaps just as importantly it was creating a community of listeners and callers. For some participants there was great comfort in the knowledge that there was a community of listeners tuning into programs and also comfort in listening to people calling the program sometimes regardless of the discussion topic.

Part of the contribution talkback radio was making to the lives of audience members in relation to the creation of community was evident in the stories participants told about meeting other callers. This occurred either through attendance at events publicised via talkback radio or when audience members had actually contacted a talkback program asking that their name and phone number be passed onto another caller to the program. A participant in the 4BC discussion group mentioned that the station’s gardening talkback program had discussed a bus trip which was being organised by a particular gardening club and talkback radio callers had met other callers and listeners through that event and they had continued to communicate with them after the event. In this respect talkback was performing a social networking role by connecting people with common interests. An ABC Sydney audience member told a story about a wedding that had resulted from a talkback caller hearing another callers’ voice and asking the station to pass his details onto that caller. The two had apparently married as a result of being connected by the talkback radio program. Other participants in the group were familiar with this story and said they had noticed that both callers had either ceased calling or had called the station far less frequently once they got together. Other participants mentioned being concerned when regular callers suddenly stopped calling the program. They sometimes sought out information about the caller to determine if that caller required assistance. There was an intrinsic sense for participants across all of the groups involved in this study that talkback radio was their community. For example:

“It’s intrinsically fascinating and I just love it but I also love this sense of community and especially like from Tony Delroy onwards at night. This sense of community. [This sense] of there being a group of people. I don’t ring up, I only listen but I love when the

regulars, the nice regulars move in, and how sad it is when one of them dies, or is in hospital.” ABC Brisbane discussion group participant

Some of those involved in the study found that their respective community of listeners and callers were like-minded and thus found talkback provided them with a space for listening to and connecting with the views of other people. Others recognised that talkback radio provided the community with a space for “tribal chest beating”. For example:

“What I mean by tribal chest beating and I think along with X [name removed] and, it’s part of a virtual reality that all of us have spoken about, the way we create this equivalent of a community that’s really fundamentally important on a personal level, forget about politics. Why we talk to each other and it’s all about bringing together of like-minded individuals... [It’s] our identity if you like, that we belong to this tribe, that we are part of the, but as friends of the ABC, we all like each other, we’re the same age, speak the same way, everybody is very articulate and it’s all very much a tribal thing, I think. But also a bit of research was done recently in the states where it was seen that knowledge was allowing people to actually physically cluster according to their personal demographics and so on. So what I’m saying, is we’re doing this in a virtual reality using talkback. My second point, [talkback radio is useful for] obviously promotion, community groups are trying to raise money or whatever, individuals, political parties and so on.” ABC Lismore, Byron Bay discussion group participant

The above comment and comments by other participants in the various discussion groups revealed that there was a level of recognition that the talkback community did not need to be populated by people who were in agreement on every issue raised and that rigorous discussion and debate was welcomed, as long as it was informed. For example:

“Election time, I like to listen to other people’s viewpoint and sometimes I’d get a person’s viewpoint I never thought of or take a measure of me dad’s views and me mum’s views, all the rest of it and somebody would come up with something totally, totally opposite to what I really thought about with the coming election and so forth. You know, even though I have always sort of got my own views, but sometimes they would give me another thought. I can always respect their views even though I don’t always agree and I think talkback radio is a good issue to keep the brain going and so forth.” 4BC discussion group participant

This was an important and oft-repeated story – community could be formed by talkback audiences regardless of whether audience members agreed with each other or not. However, with the formation of a community of listeners, there were draw backs as some participants had discovered. Some participants who regularly called said they had been recognised in public when they spoke. Often people who heard them talking in the course of their daily activities would ask them to confirm their identity as a

talkback personality. Being recognised in this manner was for these participants an extension of the metaphorical space of talkback as a community to the actual physical space of the community in which they lived. This had caused some study participants to stop calling talkback programs, as one participant explained:

“I very rarely go to air because people recognise my voice still and if I go to air, which is once a year, my father will ring in the next half hour... I’m like, oh my god, get a life. Anyway, so I will SMS and I get on the blog.” ABC Brisbane discussion group participant

And another said:

“When you ring people do recognise your voice and if it’s your friends, that’s why you have to have that confidence that what you’re saying [is right]. I mean sometimes I will ring up but I think that’s just nonsense and I’m not going to because you’ve got a reputation to uphold.” 5AA Adelaide discussion group participant

Many of the people who phoned the 1800 line established to recruit participants for this study were unable to attend the discussion groups held for this study. However, they identified that talkback radio was performing an important and extremely valued role in connecting them with the broader community. More than 100 callers to the free call line identified this as a role that was being fulfilled by talkback radio programs. The theme of talkback’s role in offsetting the isolation study participants felt was also frequently mentioned in the discussion groups:

“...that’s why I listen to it, just because it connects you to the community too, if you’re a bit isolated. You feel as if you’ve got a connection to the world or to your local community as well.” 2CC ACT discussion group participant

In relation to the idea of talkback radio bringing communities into existence participants in the study identified that talkback performed a vital role in connecting people when natural disasters isolated them. In groups held in Brisbane, ACT, Renmark, Adelaide, Sydney and Byron Bay participants identified that during storms, fires, drought, and floods vital information and a sense of connectivity had been provided through talkback radio. In the following instance a participant talked about talkback’s role during bushfires that had occurred in Canberra:

“... because nobody else told us what was going on, we knew but nobody else told us so that was how we were able to [keep informed], and I think from then on I basically had that radio stuck to my ear until about two months ago. Before that I had listened to it a little bit ... but then, after the fires that was just it. I was just totally hooked. It was just that connection to the community.” 2CC discussion group participant

This issue is explored in more detail in this report within the section that covers the role of talkback in relation to the provision of news and information. The isolation that geographical location could cause and talkback radio’s role in making audiences

feel that they were able to overcome that was emphasised by an ABC Lismore, Byron Bay discussion group participant. She said:

“... the ABC is my station of choice and pretty much right through the 24 hours, different periods, listen and I see it as communicationally (sic) of a community and not just the immediate but the wider community in taking us out into that community and bringing fresh ideas where we, where I in this country, little country town, might feel isolated and like that.”

And from the same participant a little later in the discussion:

“... like everybody else had said, particularly for living in a remote location, as I said, I think you feel a connection. A community is a very strong motivator and after a while you get to know certain others who ring up and it becomes, it's a bit like our local paper here, write into the editor. So you're talking through the station to other people as a way of retaining and developing that sort of connection.” ABC Lismore, Byron Bay discussion group participant

Participants also reported that by listening to talkback radio and in the process feeling connected to their community they became aware of ordinary people's views and opinions and got a sense of what community opinion was on issues. However, this was greeted cautiously by others who felt that talkback radio was too often credited with reflecting community sentiment, when it was not the case. This issue is taken up later in the report, but the following examples reflect that for some talkback radio provides indications of community feeling on issues:

“You're getting the, supposedly, man in the street or the woman in the street and that actually is a good aspect of talkback because you start to feel a little more about maybe what the community might be trying to say or feel about issues rather than just being purely, I don't know, the authorities or the government's point of view.” 2UE discussion group participant

And:

“I work at the Lebanese Community Council, I've been there for three years. I listen to all the Arabic, particularly because we advertise all our activities, also because I like to sometimes hear my own voice, sometimes I'm doing interviews, only kidding, but I do. So, it's also good to listen to what's been happening in the community on a local level as well, talkback means to me, it gives you an opening to what people are actually saying in the community...” 2MFM discussion group participant

While the 2MFM and SBS Arabic radio program audience participants in this study identified that talkback on this station and program made them feel part of a community, the station and program fulfilled another role in respect to community for them. Talkback was enabling these audiences to reach out to connect with non-

Muslim and non-Arabic communities. This was achieved through bringing guests from a variety of Australian community, private and government groups onto these talkback programs to discuss issues. In Bankstown where 2MFM is located, there was a sense among participants that part of the audience for the station was non-Muslims who were tuning in because they were interested in the talkback content. This also gave the participants the feeling that by being part of the audience, they were connecting with communities outside their own.

In connecting with the broader non-Muslim communities these audiences learned what life was like in other communities. Importantly for these audiences talkback also provided lessons on life in Australia which recent immigrants said they found particularly useful. For example:

“[the station teaches us] Look after your neighbours, talk to them, we have to do it, even if you don’t speak the language, say good morning, use your hands. They gave us idea about how to make time between us and our neighbours, how to save water, how to look after kids when they using computers, internet...”

For the 2MFM audience members involved in this study, talkback radio on that station provided a boost to their morale and encouraged them to participate in the community and cultural life of Australia. For example a participant made the following comment in the context of a discussion about the role of the station in providing its listeners with support and the sense that they could make a contribution to the community:

“...[the station tells] Muslims that we could go out there, we do have the potential and it’s only through interaction that we could really have a voice.” 2MFM discussion group participant

The SBS Arabic focus group participants also identified that the program had an important role in providing information about what was happening in the community. The first comment in the following exchange relates to the level of relevancy this participant placed on the information SBS provided through the Arabic program:

Participant: “I think the SBS though [talking] SBS is the number one with the information about the community.”

Facilitator: “Ok, why do you say that?”

Participant: “Because, always you know, when it start, for ten minutes news and after that he give information about what’s happening.”

Facilitator: “And when you say community information, how would you define community information? Is it events that are happening or is it information about health services?”

Participant: “Yes, that’s, information about, health information, about immigration and information about.” SBS Arabic program

## discussion group

Talkback radio's role in creating a sense of community for its audiences was highly valued by the participants in the discussion groups held for this study. It provides a sense of connection and connectivity for audiences that they do not necessarily find through other media or even within their neighbourhood. In this respect, talkback's role has been under-recognised by researchers, but it is a role that is highly appreciated by those who listen to and call talkback radio. In this way talkback provides both a symbolic and actual space in which communities of listeners and callers can enter into and engage with a community through conversation or by listening to other members of their community doing so. Although the nature of the community that talkback creates varies according to the format and style of the talkback being listened to, members of those communities are achieving a sense of belonging as a result of listening to and calling talkback. The value of this sense of connection for audiences, particularly the vulnerable, isolated, elderly and those with health problems is explored in the next section of this report.

## 5.2 For company and therapy

“And I live by myself and I just find it’s company for me, I have to have it on all the time and if I ring up, I feel like I’m part of something because otherwise I’m not, part of anything.” ABC Adelaide discussion group participant

And:

“Because I don’t go to the pub or clubs very much to hear what people are saying. That’s what I get out of talkback radio, company, education and information.” 2UE focus group participant

For study participants who were housebound or who had limited access to their geographical communities for reasons related to finances, health, social situation or mobility, talkback was providing a palpable sense that they remained part of and connected to their geographical community and to a community of talkback listeners and callers. The following discussion highlighted the value of talkback in this respect and revealed that for some it had replaced the local neighbourhood:

Participant 1: “I know a lot of people rely on listening to other people interact, like it is a medium that you can get involved in and I think without talkback a lot of people would just be hard done by because you just wouldn’t have a way of expressing yourself. And like you were saying about being alone, I know a lot of people that even for an hour or two they might be alone, like I might go home tonight and rather than be on the phone... the radio is on or even though I might be on the computer, I’ve got the radio on behind and it actually makes life a little bit more interesting then just not having it. I think it would be a big loss [if it wasn’t there].”

Participant 2: “It’s taken the place of the neighbourhood.

Participant 1: “Yeah, that’s right.” 2UE discussion group participant

Other study participants who were self-employed or who worked at home found talkback radio not only provided them with a connection to the outside world, but a sense of companionship as well.

“Well I think when you are sort of sitting around, I work at home so I don’t get the opportunity to engage with people everyday and it allows me the opportunity from time to time to express my concerns...” ABC Adelaide discussion group participant

In this respect talkback radio mitigated the sense of isolation that this individual felt because of his work situation. The following exchange was indicative of its role in this respect:

Facilitator: “So you listen to people calling in?”

Participant: “It’s just about listening to other people crapping on about stuff. And I guess that comes back again to that isolation thing.”

Facilitator: “So are you speaking like somebody who has felt isolated?”

Participant: “In the community, yeah, and if you’ve just got music on, you can’t, you’re like in a bubble sort of thing. I actually got totally hooked to talkback radio after the fires, because I didn’t have any power for a week and I only had the radio and even as a security thing too because that’s all we had.” 2CC ACT discussion group

2MFM focus group attendees also said talkback gave them an outlet to discuss the personal issues they faced, whether social, health or otherwise. For instance:

“This way with the radio station here we discuss our problems like talkback with everyone here at the station, we are part of this.”  
2MFM discussion group participant

Several of the discussion groups were attended by individuals who revealed during the discussions that they had experienced mental health problems. Many of the individuals who were unable to attend the discussion groups also told the Chief Investigator that they had mental health problems. For these individuals, talkback radio hosts and callers represented a source of therapy, as well as a friend. For the vulnerable talkback radio could be an important tool. One participant said:

“It’s also, it’s human in the sense that some people are vulnerable in certain aspects of their lives and have a voice and that probably promotes understanding about people’s difficulties as well.” 2CC discussion group participant

A participant in another focus group explained what talkback meant for him:

“Yeah well, I listen to 2UE because it’s informative too and I used to listen John Laws a lot and I rang John Laws before and I’ve actually talked to John Laws about issues to deal with mental illness because I suffer from schizophrenia but I listen to 2GB as well.” 2UE discussion group participant

However, some forms of talkback radio could also be particularly harmful to the vulnerable as a 2MFM discussion group participant who had previously worked as a taxi driver explained. He said he developed health problems and had to quit his job because of the influence of populist formats of talkback radio on his passengers. He explained that when he was driving cabs he was abused daily by passengers because of his religion and cultural background. He said many of his passengers had listened to populist talkback and absorbed the ideas it promoted about Australia and Australianness and they had then told him to go back to Iraq. This participant was

visibly upset as he related this story and he said the experiences had impacted on his mental well-being.

But the study showed that talkback wasn't just therapy for those who experienced mental illnesses, it provided a form of therapy to those who had other health problems too. The following exchange highlight its role in this respect:

Facilitator: "... do you spend a lot of time at home?"

Participant: "Yes, through my health."

Facilitator: "So do you find it's company for you, the radio?"

Participant: "Yes, definitely."

Facilitator: "One of the things other people we have spoken to, who spend a lot of time at home have said about the radio, is that it's a form of therapy?"

Participant: "Yes, yes."

Facilitator: "So can you talk to us a bit about how you find it a form of therapy?"

Participant: "Well, when you're going through pain, and like health issues, it certainly helps."

Facilitator: "And in what way?"

Participant: "It sort of takes your mind off your health issue." ABC Renmark discussion group participant

And talkback radio also provided therapy through humour for many listeners as was demonstrated by the following comment:

Participant 1: "You get a bit of a laugh out of it."

Participant 2: "Yeah."

Participant 3: "Some of the things."

Facilitator: "And sometimes a laugh can be really good when you're not feeling well?"

Participant 2: "Yeah." ABC Renmark discussion group participant

### 5.3 News and information

Talkback radio audiences engage with talkback radio because it often provides news that they cannot necessarily access elsewhere. Two distinct sub-themes were identified in this area:

1. Talkback radio provides hyper-local news to audiences that is generally not covered by other media;
2. Talkback radio provides multicultural communities with news from their homelands in their own language that they otherwise would not be able to access.

#### 5.3.1 Hyper-local news

Talkback radio provided many of the people involved in this study with an alternative or an addition to other news sources. Most commonly, the type of news provided through talkback was hyper-local, that is about local events and issues that were often not covered by other media. Audiences said it didn't matter whether this information was high-brow discussion or just information about every day life. For example:

Participant 1: "It's not petty, niggly stuff.

Participant 2: "If it's local and petty, good."

Participant 3: "Or can it actually get into the real big, your intellectual stuff..." ABC Adelaide discussion group participants

Hyper-local news included information about events happening in the community and discussions about issues that were specific to local communities. This level of news and information exposed audiences to information they felt they could not only connect with, but often personally benefit from. The following comment was indicative of this:

"Local ABC gives me the sense of community and the sense, well it gives me information about what's going on in the community as well. So I tend to listen to that because of that side of things." ABC Lismore, Byron Bay discussion group participant

Many participants mentioned the value of talkback callers who phoned in to provide local information such as warnings about traffic delays and road conditions. For example:

"In these days of mobile phones it is very useful to know one hell of a storm has just hit the north coast, there's a pothole, be careful, the gateway is blocked, traffic reports... We thank those people who do phone in and the producers take it straight away." 4BC discussion group participant

For many it provided specialist information that they were unable to access elsewhere and often resulted in a kind of sharing of news and information amongst the audience, which was highly valued and not available elsewhere. For instance:

“...and I find in the programs you learn a lot, because if people, if somebody rings up and says “I want something” sure as god somebody’s going to ring up and say “right, I’ve got it, you can have it” and then you learn a lot more after that too. I’ve learned quite a bit from different people, regarding whatever they have, especially Col Campbell gardening. We listen to that all the time and it’s very interesting. I’ve learnt quite a lot through radio... It’s quite interesting, you learn a lot from talkback radio, I find anyway.” 4BC discussion group participant

For some participants, radio and in particular talkback radio had replaced their usual sources of news, because they had limited time. A participant explained:

“... I only get to listen to ABC for a couple of hours in the morning and then later on in the afternoon. It’s my newspaper in the morning of local issues, which are then discussed at morning tea at work. It’s also my forum for correcting a few of my colleagues on certain facts that I’ve heard. ABC Lismore, Byron discussion group participant

And another person explained how talkback radio had replaced the need to tune into traditional news bulletins of an evening:

“... I started listening to talkback radio when I used to drive a cab which goes back about 20 years. That was where I got my general information from, from people in cabs, people I picked up, it was after I left the cabs, when I was courier driving, that I was completely missing out what was happening during the day, and I found on talkback radio, that’s when I discovered 4BC. It was as if I still had people around me and I was picking up information, and it made no sense to watch the news at night actually because I gained what I need during the day. If I missed the news I haven’t missed anything at all really. So now I’m home all day, I’ve got two radios on, one at one end of the house and one at the other side so I don’t miss whatever’s going on. That’s my reason for listening.” 4BC discussion group participant

While, hyper-local news was valued, participants were mindful that some talkback radio could be parochial and said it needed to be inclusive of the region it served, rather than just focus on the city or town in which the station was based. One participant suggested a local news focus should not be at the expense of ignoring important happenings outside the metropolis:

Participant 1: “What struck me is a point X made [name removed for privacy reasons], is that there are issues down there [outside of the city] which are, you think quite large scale and obviously of local interest, but you can live in Adelaide and think that there is nothing

happening out there at all and I'm sure it's the same with Port Lincoln and Riverland, etcetera."

Participant 2: "I mean the water issue is bringing some of that in."

Participant 1: "Yes."

Participant 2: "The water issue has brought in a lot of issues for metropolitan residents anyway because that topic, it's suddenly become very real for people who live in the city as much as it has for us in the country." ABC Adelaide discussion group participant

However, a listener to the same station pointed out that some programs went outside the city:

"One of the things that Peter [a program host] does which I think is very valuable... he does his show fairly regularly from different places, from Broken Hill to, different towns around about and he will go into a local pub or the local ball and he's got the local people around him. He might have a local musician or a poet or somebody on and he will talk about the local issues. And he does that regularly, you would say like, I don't know, probably seven or eight times a year. He's around... he gets quite interested in the issues in the area he's in anyway. ABC Adelaide discussion group participant

For another talkback audience member news beyond the city in which she lived, which explored the region around her, was an added bonus provided by talkback radio:

"But both of those people [hosts] have regionalised the program and I think that is wonderful. As someone who is born here and who did in fact live beyond the border of this beautiful city. There are people out there who do not live in the ACT and both of those people actually look beyond the immediate precinct and I think that is wonderful." ABC 666 ACT discussion group participant

For others local information meant practical tips about how to live in and engage with their community as is highlighted by the following comment:

In general, she likes all the programs but she mentioned particularly the morning shows and the traffic report and the segment about the community services and because of their limited English they find the radio station is their link to the community and whatever they need they call the radio station. (Translated) 2MFM discussion group participant

And talkback radio provided a kind of microcosm of community life in action for another study participant:

"Yes, but listening to the local news especially and then the national news

and then other people's comments and how they're being [conveyed].... I don't think I've read a newspaper for many, many years but I always rely on the honesty and integrity of the ABC. It's my friend, my confidante because I ring up and I don't know what I would do if I didn't have that news source or sense of community source... listening to the weather, listening to all the special people from all around our region who, the daily news, what part of their life is like and what they're going to be doing next. It's just a continuation." ABC Lismore, Byron Bay discussion group participant

Often the issues and news presented via talkback were seen by study participants as vital to the functioning of their community. 2MFM participants discussed how the station had provided coverage of the outcomes of a national karate competition in which members of the Muslim communities had participated. The coverage had provided a boost to the self-esteem of the participants and was also an example of the way in which the station could present positive images of Muslims to counter many of the negative images that mainstream media portrayed. It was also hyper-local information about individuals and groups from the local community.

Talkback also provided information that was essential during disasters or other significant events and was deemed extremely useful by participants from each station. There were multiple examples of this including the coverage of the October 2008 storms and discussion that occurred through talkback in Brisbane:

Yes, well I felt that ABC did a very good coverage. They definitely gave the best coverage of all with regards to the weather and they did a lot of coverage there at The Gap, that was one of the worst hit areas. ABC Brisbane discussion group participant

While some participants liked the local flavour of talkback radio that was transmitted via a local station and news which national talkback didn't provide that for them, others appreciated listening via talkback to news and information from around the country. The following exchange highlights that:

Facilitator: "Am I right in saying that people listen because they like local talkback and you'd rather listen to something coming out of Brisbane than perhaps something that's originated from..."

Participant 7: "It's definitely, John Laws has nothing about us here. It's Sydney, nothing about Melbourne, Sydney."

Participant 2: "Knowing he goes across the country..."

Participant 7: "Giving Sydney traffic."

Participant 11: "The flip side of that is we were like being a local community, having all the stations together. Now I, you know, John Laws had his flaws, it's been well written about in about talkback radio but I kind of got to hear what are my fellow Australians were doing in Melbourne and all that, you don't kind of hear that anymore..." 4BC

discussion group participants.

But this view was not shared by all participants in this discussion group:

“That’s the reason of the value for what 4BC is, going Queensland wide ... you do get calls from Rockhampton, Mackay, and that’s good cos’ you can still get through and they are important issues because, particularly when you’re talking about issues of a state government, the Bligh government, and the Labor government in Queensland, they are topical from one end of the state to the other. So I think that there’s some real value in that. Going nationally, I’m not opposed to, but our ability to participate is taken from us and so that’s where you kind of lose it and you do get kind of Sydney centric. 4BC discussion group participant

Although there were slightly differing views on just how far talkback radio should go in its discussion of events – whether hyper-local, regional, state or national - one common thread seemed to weave through the perception of those involved in this study. Listeners realised and often appreciated that talkback would sometimes focus on issues that they may not be interested in, but which they knew some other audience members would find those topics interesting and there was general respect for talkback’s role in that respect. In other words, audiences appreciated the fact that talkback of the kind examined in this research provided discussion on a range of topics from a range of areas.

### 5.32 News from home

For study participants who listened to 2MFM and the SBS Arabic program, talkback performed an additional role in relation to providing news. For those who were born overseas it provided a sources of news from their country of origin. Conversation in both of these discussion groups focussed on the limits of international news coverage in mainstream Australian news media and the problems that occurred when the Australian news media misreported international stories. One participant explained:

“As I’m an immigrant, I am away from my family and my homeland. I always feel anxious and nostalgic to find out any news about where I come from. I read the Spanish newspaper daily, or watching TV to know any news about my homeland. I am accustomed to write letter to the newspaper and some representative people, even to the president... [it annoys me] when I see misleading news about my country and the Arab world.” SBS Arabic program discussion group participant

In commenting on the feeling of nostalgia raised by being away from her country of origin, this participant also raised an important issue in relation to the program’s role via its provision of news and information in providing a sense of comfort and connection for those who were physically distanced from their communities and families. The following exchange provided more detail about the role of the program in this area:

Facilitator 1: “I wanted to ask you about what you said earlier, that you listened for nostalgia. Can you tell us a little bit more about that?”

Facilitator 2: “What sorts of issues do you feel nostalgic about?”

P2: “Just a passion for the homeland.”

Facilitator 2: “So it’s memories of home?”

P1: “Of love, my family, my homeland, my friends.”

Facilitator 2: “So hearing about it, even if it’s current events actually brings back those memories...”

P1: “Of course.” SBS Arabic program discussion group participants

But 2MFM and the SBS Arabic program also provided important information and perspectives on what was happening in Australia for their audiences and one study participant explained:

“... actually that station gives you more knowledge about what’s going on in our country, I’m not saying this country. I’ve been here

26 years and I hope my English ... what I like with this station is [it tells you] what's going on in Australia. That station gives you the connection, as a people you know. That station gives us lots of information about Australia, what's going on in Australia especially with the community, you know. Some people have only just come here one year, two years, three years and they really want to be with the people..." 2MFM discussion group participant

And this comment was supported by those who participated in the SBS Arabic focus group discussion. They indicated they found the program as valuable source of information about Australian society:

"When I migrate to Australia since then I listen to the Arabic program, the SBS radio, that give me orientation about what happening in Australia and the world. Where there are a talkback around an issue I understand and have some knowledge I'll call in to express my point of view. Also, always I write back to the Arabic newspaper in Sydney about different matters, some of them concerning our Australian society. As well, wrote in the past, several letters to different minister and MP in Australia about issues concerning our Australian community. In conclusion, that's the reason make me interested in listening and participating on talkback radio program..." SBS Arabic program discussion group participant

There was value for audience members in 2MFM and the SBS Arabic program's role in providing information about community events and activities which was often imparted via the exchanges that took place during talkback, regardless of the language it which it was provided. For example:

"I'm actually not Arabic speaking so I only listen to the English shows. I'm actually a convert, so the English programs are the only [programs I can listen to]. They've got topics on the radio station that I find really interesting. I think it's really good and informative, especially if I know what they're talking about. It's really good for the community, and like some of the other ladies were saying, for the kids as well. The talkback in particular I find relates to us more. I've listened to a lot of talkback, as you said, Alan Jones, you try to call and they don't let you get through or if you do get through which I have been sometimes, Triple M at night time, if he [the host] doesn't agree with you he literally blows you up on air and hangs up. 2MFM discussion group participant

The 2MFM study participants identified that talkback on the station helped audience members learn English. 2MFM broadcasts in both English and Arabic and discussion group participants whose first language was not English said the station provided them with a way of learning the language of their adopted homeland. For example:

Facilitator: "Do you listen to the programs in English?"

P6: "Yes, to ..."

Facilitator: "Help your language?"

P6: "Yes."

Facilitator: "Do you call up in English?"

P6: "Sometimes, I prefer myself before I call up to put the words together. For my kids, the radio you find in here what's going on for the kids you know, if you want to look out for them. So, we like our community, looking after our family, especially if you don't have a grandfather, a grandmother."

Facilitator: "So you're isolated"

P6: "Yes." 2MFM discussion group participant

For others, the SBS Arabic program and 2MFM were important resources that assisted them in maintaining their first language Arabic, as was highlighted by the following discussion:

P1: "And it's more important too for people who have just arrived to the country that doesn't speak English."

Facilitator: "To give them an opportunity?"

P1: "To give that important news and information about how we can live in the country. That's what we need."

P2: "I think a person always call a station he or she likes and I think 'cos as Arabic speaking we don't have that opportunity here, like, there's not much radio program or TV, we would see people calling Al Jazeera ... with the language and that so you can express yourself, they [SBS] are discussing the issues you are more concerned with."

P1: We need to know things like where we go if we have a problem.  
SBS Arabic program discussion group participant

Talkback in Arabic provided an essential service for audience members who may not otherwise tune into talkback or other radio because of language difficulties. A participant explained:

Facilitator: "Is there a cultural element or a language barrier here related to how comfortable people feel about talking about sensitive issues or with conflict embedded in them, on the radio?"

P2: "Look, the last one I did for example was about breast cancer and I did an interview about that and one of the things that was going on was that breast cancer, Arabic women are more likely to get

breast cancer ‘cos they don’t get themselves checked, ‘cos of cultural issues or language issues and people were ringing up and saying, ‘no that’s not right, we do check’. So, yeah. So, language usually isn’t an issue with the Arabic radio.”

Facilitator: “I was wondering about participating in the other general talkback.”

P2: “You wouldn’t find many people that I know ‘cos they’re not confident in English.” SBS Arabic program discussion group

In this way, talkback was providing an important service through facilitating provision of a variety of information about essential services, especially for newly arrived residents and citizens. For example:

Facilitator: “And do you think that talkback radio would have a role in dealing with people who are newly arrived, giving them the opportunity in their own language perhaps to ring up and ask a pertinent question that might not be asked at other times so do you see that there’s potential for talkback radio to actually offer a service there to newly arrived migrants?”

Participant 1: “From time to time I think talkback, the SBS, give them information for new people that have arrived, school or classes you can go to, you come in, you have to go to that and preparing the new life, you can do this or you can do that ... I think from time to time the SBS say that when we have a question, English school, how you going to get your kids to the school what you doing about this information.” SBS Arabic program discussion group

The following exchange provides an example of the types of information the SBS Arabic program’s talkback provides to immigrants:

Facilitator: “And do people also ring up looking for assistance or direction, which service to I go to or that sort of thing?”

Participant: “I think so.”

Participant: “Sometime they is ringing in “we live in this area, we can’t find a job here, what can we do, this area, what can we do to put our kids in a public school not a private school, these kinds of things, sometimes the SBS has the information ...”

Facilitator: “So SBS is referring callers to agencies.”

Participant: “So they can send them to some office, Islamic Association.” SBS Arabic program discussion group

SBS Arabic audience study participants identified that talkback on the program was

such an essential service they wanted more of it. Although they recognised that SBS provided services for a variety of multicultural communities, they wanted more talkback. For example:

Facilitator: “One of you said earlier that you wish there was more talkback on SBS, does anyone else agree with that? Should there be more talkback opportunities with the SBS Arabic program?”

P1: “Yes, should be more.”

P2: “When it’s hard to phone the other stations, language, confidence or something, the Arabic would be good for more confidence. The language you talk in you can express yourself more and maybe because they speak Arabic they would be more open to your opinions.” SBS Arabic program discussion group

The last point made was an important one – both 2MFM and SBS Arabic program provided what audiences saw as relatively safe spaces in which they could engage in discussion with confidence and without the risk of having their views or opinions ridiculed. This was at times tempered by the difficulties some participants had getting to air on the SBS Arabic program because of problems they saw as related to their political views.

Participants in the SBS Arabic program group and the 2MFM group identified that they benefited in several specific ways from their respective talkback radio – in maintaining their first language, as a method of learning English, as a source of information about their communities, local, national and international, and in providing company and a sense of connection to their homeland. These were benefits that mainstream talkback was unable to provide to these audiences.

This was best illustrated up by the following comments:

Facilitator: “... particularly with the Lebanese Community Council, what would be the impact, and I’m not suggesting for a moment that the SBS Arabic program is not going to continue, but if that space wasn’t there, what would be the impact?”

Participant: “I don’t think that would make people happy, there’d be complaining to stop that because that’s the only channel that’s giving information about health, education, information about the government, everything. I think, all the details that the people are getting from the SBS, especially the people that do not speak English... I think SBS [is] very important for the community.” SBS Arabic program discussion group

## **5.4 Talkback Radio and Democracy**

Participants in this study saw talkback radio in one of two ways when it came to the talkback radio providing a space in which they could participate in democracy and democratic processes. It was either friend or foe in this regard. They either thought particular talkback radio programs were useful in facilitating their entry to the public sphere or they regarded these programs as too limited in the issues they covered to make meaningful contributions to democratic process.

### **Talkback radio – Democracy’s Friend**

For many of the people involved in this study, talkback radio provided a space in which they could engage in discussions and debates with both talkback hosts and other callers. The following comment was indicative of the positive comments participants made in relation to the issue of talk back radio as democracy’s friend:

“I’m a great fan of radio. I think radio is a magnificent medium, far superior to television. For me talkback radio is a whole exercise in democracy and I find it so valuable that people from all walks of life and from all economic backgrounds can basically have equality of making one phone call at a local charge, pretty well, or free and make a comment about how they feel, how they participate in the society that we live in. I think the power of talkback is amazing. I remember a hail storm and a couple of flood events, whatever, amazing drama and participatory democracy in terms of informing each other and trying to safeguard people in situations. As far as comment goes, I really surf the channels quite a lot... but I really do tune into the other stations to try and get a feel of the quality of the discussion that is going on in the community among people that I normally wouldn’t come across.” ABC Sydney focus group participant

The above comment also touched on the issue of the range of voices that appear in some styles of talkback. This particular audience member valued being exposed to the views of people and the discussion that she would otherwise not encounter. However not all talk back formats provided this range of opinions or were reflective of the extent of discussion in a community and in the case of the above audience member it was necessary to seek out the programs that provided this type of talk back.

### **Talkback radio – democratic foe**

While some participants in this study believed talkback radio provided a mechanism by which they could engage in democracy this was not the case for other participants, particularly because producers and hosts held the key to access to that space for them. A study participant spoke of the frustration he experienced with talkback and in the context of what initially appeared to be a joke, but which he repeated several times, explained his lived experience with talkback radio and the dissatisfaction that he felt with some of the discussions on talkback:

I've got this idea for a technological proposition to diffuse this concentration of the tyrannical power, actually if you want to copy write it, I think Sony or someone should have an electronic device or a technological device, you'd call it a Laws laser or a Zemanek zapper or whatever. ABC Sydney discussion group participant

## 5.5 The power of talkback radio

Almost all of the participants in this study recognised the immense power of talkback radio, both in relation to shaping the opinions of some audiences and in influencing politicians. While there was recognition that this power was often associated with particular formats of talkback, participants acknowledged that there was often danger associated with that power. Other participants thought it was a matter of an individual's personal opinion as to whether talkback wielded this degree of power and whether its influence was negative or positive. The following lengthy exchange highlighted the various views that participants had on this topic:

Participant 5: "But they definitely do shape opinions sometimes, radio stations and if it's the wrong way it'll cause a lot of problems too, you know."

Participant 14: "That's also a matter of opinion itself, whether, you know like, you might think they're biased on a particular issue and I think, from my experience, that's right on the mark but someone else might think it's the whole flip side so..."

Participant 14: "Of all the questions I thought you were going to ask before but I don't think I've heard yet, is how influential is what you hear on radio against, not just the advertisement but how influential are the points of views, who's saying what. If you trust some announcers more than others when it comes down to, in your own head, your own point of view, your own standing and your beliefs and what you act on. You might turn your perspective right around or not or does it really not matter what they say, do you just hear it and you still think your own thoughts? To what level does the radio influence and change your thoughts?"

Participant 3: "I think it has a great influence on people and that is why it traumatizes me so much, the misinformation that's out there, but one thing that I think talkback radio has a great capacity to do, which they don't, is to champion an issue for half an hour... an hour one day and they never follow it up, they rarely go back. They'll grill the Premier on an issue or the Health Minister or the education or police and they'll just browbeat them for ten minutes and they'll take a heap of calls saying what an idiot they are and, how awful and then, nothing. You will not hear about it again until it bobs up in The Courier-Mail in a month, or in 6 months when it's another issue. They don't, and I think they have a great ability to influence change

if they actually focus on issues and say ‘right we’re not letting this go’. You hear them say, Miller has never let go of an issue, but he never goes back to it. Maybe 4BC needs to have something with, here’s a report card, these are the issue’s we’re championing this week and this is what we intend to do about it, we didn’t hear back from the Minister. Campbell Newman is a classic, it’s “I don’t know about it, I’ll get back to you” and then they get him back the next week and they say “remember, there were three issues last week you had to find out about” and they close. They go full circle and he doesn’t resolve it and that’s one thing where they leave so many important issues just hanging up in cyberspace, out in the airwaves.”

Participant 1: “Talkback’s about the only area where the great unwashed get a chance to express their opinions.”

Participant 7: “And the grey nomads feel that they can get a word in, they can get help without any cost from the specialists they interview and frankly I think 4BC is aimed at the grey nomad.”

Facilitator: “Do you [name removed] have anything to add?”

Participant 10: “I do get influenced by it. It sort of gives me a clearer understanding of people among whom I live and I mean 30 per cent of the people who call them are blithering idiots, I’m sorry to say.”

Participant 5: “How many?”

P10: “Thirty per cent, I’m just throwing a figure. A certain percentage you feel are a bunch of blithering idiots. It’s always nice to hear a fresh perspective, you know, depending on what part of the country you’re in, what, if you’re a city boy or a country boy.” 4BC focus group exchange

The above exchange indicates that although talkback is seen as a powerful tool for forming public opinion, it does not necessarily change the views of all those who listen. People involved in this discussion wanted talkback radio to perform a public journalism role in terms of facilitating extended public debate and discussion on issues and solution building to community issues.

Talkback radio’s power was also recognised in another way by participants. Many participants said calls to talkback were sometimes listened to by companies and governments and participants had directly experienced the power of talkback when these organisations or government had intervened to fix their complaint. For example:

“... also they’ve helped people because it’s made me realise the power of talkback radio and people ring up and it could be a huge problem with Telstra or someone about getting a bill for something that you know, wasn’t due and they can’t get help and they’ve waited for Telstra for an hour. And then, someone in the station there gets on to them and finds out and gets some help and the problem is

fixed. So I think that's a good thing, that we can have that sort of power because otherwise, you're only just a little voice and then we all have lost..." ABC Adelaide focus group participant

Another perspective was provided by a participant who used to work for an organisation which had to respond to complaints talk back callers made on air:

Yes, well, I know that happens [that organisations monitor talk back] because when I worked for a disability service provider and we would get a phone call from that organisation saying, look there's been a parent on talkback radio complaining about the service that your organisation is offering, providing and then we would have the opportunity [to respond]. We wouldn't be listening to it necessarily because we'd be at work. 5AA focus group participant

Here too there were dissenting views in the discussion groups as to the power of talkback radio and the following comment highlighted how audiences thought program styles impacted on the power of talkback. In the following discussion participants talk about a program, The Soapbox, which takes calls on any issue, rather than the host setting a topic for the show.

Participant 1: "Yeah, I think it's probably a worthless hour quite frankly, because it is a soapbox and the fellas will tell you, the guys will tell you that they cannot express a political [opinion] or own opinion and I've rung once and expressed an opinion and the only answer I got was thank you for your call and that's what they say to all the calls and they move on to the next person. Now if you're going to have a talkback show, I would prefer to talk to somebody who is an expert with whom you can have some repartee, an opinion which goes back and forwards, which everybody might get, because the ABC understandably are not allowed to express an opinion and they certainly can't become involved, I think that 11am to 12 bracket, apart from the weather is a bit of a waste of time really because you get the phonetical (sic) crank, to the well meaning fool, to the uninformed, to the person who is totally upset and it's like talking to a sponge. It sinks in and goes nowhere and you get nothing back out of it."

Facilitator: "As a listener or as a caller?"

Participant 2: "As a caller and a listener."

Facilitator: "O.K. So are you saying that you would prefer to have a talkback session where you would prefer to have a guest in the studio who was say, an expert and that they invite calls around, interaction with the expert?"

Participant 2: "Yes, I do."

Facilitator: "O.K."

Participant 1: “But that goes on at other times.”

Participant 2: “That goes on earlier, but the soapbox, as I said between 11 and 12 is this talking to a sponge.”

Facilitator: “Anyone have a different view?”

Participant 3: “Yes, I think the soapbox is a soapbox. At least someone will stand up on the soapbox and expresses an opinion. They don’t have to agree with it ... but at least you get it off your chest.” ABC Adelaide focus group exchange

While there were a variety of views expressed by study participants on the extent of the power of talkback and its ability to influence public opinion, which they often linked to the program’s format, many participants found it an excellent means of engaging with aspects of democratic process. A number of sub-themes emerged in relation to talkback radio and democracy including:

1. Talkback radio’s provision of a space to engage in democratic process via engagement with politics and access to politicians;
2. Talkback radio as problem solver;
3. Talkback radio as a form of citizen journalism – a place and space in which audiences perform journalistic roles of providing information and correcting misinformation. However, not all audience members viewed themselves as performing the role of citizen journalists.

## 5.6 Having Access to Politicians and Engaging with Politics

Study participants were overwhelmingly aware that talkback radio wielded significant political power. They identified two aspects to talkback radio's power in this area – the first was in setting political agendas and the second was in the provision of access to the airwaves for politicians. Just as importantly, audiences were actively using talkback to access politicians. An ABC Adelaide discussion group participant explained that talkback radio's real power was to be found in “who gets in, who gets out and who gets listened to and who doesn't”. Another listener to the same station was “astounded” at the power of talkback radio and its ability to influence the direction of policy and politics. A participant who listened to and sometimes called ABC Sydney provided an anecdote that illustrated talkback radio's power. She said a group of farmers had opened for Christmas trading in a Sydney market several years ago. When some people had complained to the local council the market had been closed and farmers had faced the potential imposition of significant financial penalties. She explained that someone had called Alan Jones about it and he had spoken to the relevant minister about the issue, which led to the reversal of the decision by the local council.

“So the Council had reversed the decision but the ordinance department, the penalty department of [the council] were pursuing it criminally and then, the minister. The merchants called Alan Jones. Alan Jones called the minister and he [the minister] just reversed it within a morning almost.”

Some study participants were highly critical of the way that talk programs wielded political power and of the people who called some talkback programs as was evidenced by the following conversation:

Participant 1: “You know they're there, you don't have to hang them up in the air, rally and cry for all the idiots and dimwits who see that as their [excuse] for going around bashing people and creating damage to property.”

Participant 2: “I don't like it, but they still have a right to be there and we don't have a right to censor them.”

Facilitator: “What about the role of talkback in that context? So when you're saying dimwits and idiots, are you referring to the people who would call in to those programmes, the Jones programme?”

Participant 1: “Yeah they're the sort of people who get oxygen by the Jones's.”

Participant 2: “And I would imagine that they would be censoring anyone who rang in to try and quell what was going on. I don't know but I would imagine that they do or they give them short shift.”

Participant 1: “Minority groups, [issues to do with] minority groups get the biggest airplay. If it’s controversial, and they’ve [talkback programs] got a ready audience waiting out there.”

Participant 2: “But the other thing too is that commercially, there’s always been two major people, Laws and Jones and one’s retired now, but the longer they went and the more outrageous they were. The bigger the remuneration.”

Participant 1: “Yeah.”

Participant 2: “So why would you stop?”

Participant 1: “Yeah, and they’re more popular now with all the politicians.”

Participant 2: “And then, dishonesty in getting money for promoting products.”

Participant 1: “Even the politicians.... That’s what really is awful, the politicians actually court them because they know, that they have a lot of influence.”

Facilitator: Politicians call them are you saying?

Participant 1: “Court.”

Facilitator: “Court, yes.”

Participant 1: “Because that’s what Howard was doing.”

Participant 2: “It was Howard, wasn’t it?”

Participant 1: “[Howard] went on all his [Alan Jones] shows though... [you would see] one [politician] coming out and one going in [to the studio], shake hands and they couldn’t wait to get on their shows.” ABC Byron Bay focus group exchange

There was a high level of recognition among some study participants of the connections between talkback radio hosts and politicians. Although many of the participants recognised there were problems with the power of talkback, they also realised that it was important in airing a variety of perspectives. One participant said it was important to provide other perspectives to those presented by the politicians who used talkback radio:

“... I get the feeling that it used to be a lot deeper because I’m very interested in issues, in-depth issues and I’m very interested in politics, environmental issues. I like Radio National as well and I think the radio is one way that you lift people up and it also brings, it

should be bringing in lots of different ideas. You mightn't agree with them but everyone has perspective and you need to make sure that you don't cut those different perspectives off because they all have something to contribute to a democracy. And what I see is that the democratic process, especially in Queensland is very under threat in lots of ways and when you also have politicians speaking, you actually have, often quite narrow directions of where that conversation goes and who's put on to those programmes. And that's my perspective. I just think that you need to give everyone a fair opportunity. ABC Brisbane focus group participant

This point was made in every discussion group held for this study and there was mixed reaction to the role of talkback radio in providing access to politicians. For example:

Participant: "O.K. I might be off track, but I think talkback radio is a very powerful medium and I think it has the capacity to influence public opinion and to give you an example, Anna Bligh is on the back foot now on recycled water. Looks like it's on the way out, otherwise it's going to cost her the election. Well, I think it, she's on her way out anyway, but that's just my opinion. But my colleagues and I, I'd like to think we had something to do with that to a certain extent because have fed the media a lot of information over the last six months and we've really kept the pressure up."

Facilitator: Are you saying as talkback callers?

Participant: "Talkback callers on radio, emails, talkback... and all this information is slowly filtering through to the public and the public is starting to wake up and they're starting to be informed. And they're starting to make a noise about it and I thought this is feeding back to the government and the government are getting very nervous about it because look, the only thing that interests the pollies is keeping their seat in the next Parliament, hanging on to their jobs. That's what their main concern is. So they're very, very sensitive about public opinion."  
ABC Brisbane focus group discussion

While some participants were disillusioned with the relationship between talkback hosts and politicians, others found particular forms of talkback radio provided a useful conduit for them to politicians. And it also ensured in the case of the ACT's Chief Minister talkback program that politicians were at least to some extent accountable and accessible to the public. From a participant in 2CC ACT discussion group who also listened to ABC 666 ACT:

"[Talkback radio has a role] To try to make those in authority accountable particularly our chief minister, he comes on once a fortnight on 666. And to be able to talk to him and say chief minister and say, 'why aren't you doing something' or rather and hopefully to get a response. And as I said before [it takes time], to get down to writing a letter, you've then got to be correct in fact, in grammar, the

whole thing and it may not be published.” 2CC focus group participant

Audience members spoke of complaining to the Chief Minister via the talkback program about things like potholes in their streets and getting almost immediate action on those complaints. Another participant in the same discussion group explained that the audience and styles of talkback in the ACT were “vastly different” from elsewhere. This may account for the existence of Chief Minister talkback.

“... they’re different, there’s a reflection on, this is opinion here, reflection on issues and everybody around this table has talked about politics as an issue that gets them motivated and that’s a classic Canberra experience as well. It’s the national capital. It’s a political city, so those sorts of issues come to the fore. 2CC discussion group participant

However another participant in the same group disagreed:

“ I don’t agree with that. Listening to 2CC, Mike Jefferies in the morning could reflect what you are saying there, but then you’ve got Steve Price, which is Sydney anyway, or Sydney based and then you’ve got Tim Webster, who is Sydney, and then you’ve got Mike Walsh and the calls in the 3(pm) to 6(pm) period are as low, they’re not high brow, they’re low brow, as low brow as you could get anywhere. I don’t think there’s any [political discussion] in that [time period] the calls in the afternoon, maybe in the morning that is different.”

A 5AA audience member thought talkback had little to no impact on politicians.

“The politicians don’t... it makes no difference. It doesn’t matter what you say about them on the radio, they don’t change.”

Some participants found talkback was not the right venue to bring up political issues and that it wasn’t a mechanism by which they could get politicians to solve problems. They had found other platforms to discuss their issues:

Facilitator: “So what’s your experience been [name removed]? Are you saying that you attempted to get, to blow the whistle on a story and you got ignored?”

Participant: “On a big story... I wonder why it hasn’t come out in Adelaide, why it’s been hushed up and the more I feel shut down, the more I think well maybe, at the beginning it was just a hunch.”

Facilitator: “So you called Mat and Dave’s programme and attempted to...?”

Participant : “I started with a letter, to the ABC and that just went nowhere. I think about 4 or 5 years ago now and then I followed up

with phone calls and just recently there was another case which actually confirmed my earlier case that my experience there was quite... I don't want to dominate this section. My experience was that I rang up the soapbox at ten past 11 and I thought I would surely get on then, and the lady said, 'it looks like 20 minutes wait, would you be prepared to wait?' I waited 20 minutes quite happily, because it was important, and it [was] something that the newspaper, see that's another thing, the newspaper never reported that particular story because they were embarrassed themselves. So I thought talkback radio may be the way to get the story out. I waited to half past and then the person, the lady said, 'it looks like you won't get on' and I knew what was happening, they did not want to talk about that particular [issue], it's too embarrassing. It's been hushed up and that's basically why I came tonight to express that, and what I thought was talkback radio not just entertainment, but information sharing, and I thought my issue was important enough to make the news, not for myself but for somebody who I'm standing up for."

Facilitator: "So you felt that you were screened and you told them what you wanted to say and you weren't [listened to]?"

Participant: "Correct. Now I have actually changed platform, I went on blogging and that is our big, probably not getting around to discussing that tonight, but that is the other thing, if somebody is on a [talkback radio] black list, we haven't got a blogger's black list yet. Anyway that is my experience and I haven't rung up now for, after that. Look, what's the point. I haven't rung up for a year possibly. That's the way I feel about it, I turn them off, I go across to News Radio or I write to politicians directly with what I might have said."

Facilitator: "Yes."

Participant: "And that gets far more concern off my chest and I do get a response out of it and I see things happening." ABC Adelaide discussion group

But participants in other discussion groups held for the study considered talkback radio was the only mechanism by which ordinary people could voice their opinions and engage with politicians. For example:

"I see sort of talkback, as the last resort for the ordinary person because how on earth can you have an opinion or get it [aired] anywhere? I woke up to the fact when somebody rang in and said, 'why don't you ring your local politician's office'. So, I actually have parliament's number. I ring up any particular politician that comes on. I get their number, I ring up into their main office and sometimes their electoral office and I say, 'look this is just a voter ringing in to give an opinion on such and such. Your particular politician said this on air today' and presumably they record or write down some of what goes in. Now that may get lost, so you're at their

mercy of whoever takes the call, whoever collects the letters and you have no way of getting out there, something that you are cranky about or you want changed or you want people to consider. And so, by bringing information in from other sources to a program, you actually have ordinary people [participating] and I make the comment that I'm amazed the politicians have allowed us to still keep going with talkback because prior to some of these elections, the amount of talkback that's come in, for and against on different stations has been really, really good. 2UE discussion group participant

And another participant supported this idea:

"... we know the politicians do tend to listen to talkback so it gives us an opportunity to talk to a politician indirectly. I've tried actually talking to politicians through my local member's office and haven't had any response but as soon as it's mentioned on the radio, there seems to be some recognition of that. And if you raise an issue in the right way you do find that other callers ring in and support that point of view and then politicians start to listen, it's not just one person having a gripe. Now there is five, ten, fifteen people having that same gripe, there must be something to it and therefore the politicians start to listen a little bit more." 2UE discussion group participant

In the discussion group held for ABC Sydney, a participant said that she felt frustrated that sometimes politicking on talkback radio got out of hand and she knew that political parties used talkback radio for their own lobbying purposes. However she had a solution:

"I definitely feel that if more people could get involved in surfing the channels and the discussion... but I do think people can get on and put another point of view, if they can do so fairly respectfully and fairly succinctly. I also feel quite strongly that the political parties have a real sense of the power of talkback radio. I'm pretty sure that they have people calling up whenever an election is on, with scripted material, planting ideas."

These following two comments also revealed that talkback radio had another political role for people:

Participant: "I worked in public policy for 25 years and so you always in advising government, you were always wondering what the voters thought and that, so now I'm listening and thinking, if only the voters knew this, if only the listeners knew that. I'm constantly informing myself on the better programmes and the ones that aren't high-class program, I'm listening to what everyone out there in voter land is thinking and I'm trying to put the two together and work out how we could have better policies and how we could get through to people, and how they could change the minds of the masses so they would all clamour for the good policies rather than the bad."

Facilitator: “You’re using talkback as a scientific research basically?”

Participant: “Yeah, yeah. So that’s my major interest, is what’s going wrong with the world and how to fix it because you don’t have that many opportunities if you’re not working to engage every day and doing that. My main way of engaging in that is listening to the experts on the radio and listening to people calling in giving their views and often they are experts as well. Sometimes they are everyday people but you also get an idea of what the gaps in the knowledge are and that’s what has to be done and I think, one day, I’ll go back into being a policymaker again and put this all to use.”  
ABC Brisbane discussion group

A participant who had once been a politician presented another perspective in relation to talkback radio and its political power:

“I’ve known, because of my political involvement, I’ve known at least some of the staff there [at the ABC] for some time... when I was a councillor [mentions a particular producer] was ruthless in her questioning. You felt like you had been through the mill but you felt very satisfied that you’d been. Somebody who had done a bloody good job for the public and hadn’t let you get away with anything and that sort of rigor is the element that I think is missing... But over the years, in my mind, I don’t know I could be wrong, I’d like some other views as well, I think there’s been a dropping of the standard. Now whether that is to try and gather a broader section of the community rather than saying we have a role, the local community station has a role, a commercialist role, there seems to be sort of a tendency to try and broaden that way, like we’re moving downwards.” ABC Byron Bay discussion group participant

In the 2MFM discussion group participants pointed out that talkback on that station was used for slightly different political purposes than some other styles of talkback. In this instance it was used to educate the audience against extremism:

“And so it really preaches moderation and also, teaching Muslims that we could go out there, we do have the potential and it’s only through interaction that we could really have a voice.” 2MFM discussion group participant

But not all study participants enjoyed the political nature of talkback radio or wanted to engage with politics through it. A participant in the ABC Sydney audience group said she wasn’t looking for political debate, rather she listened to be informed as she believed general knowledge was a “wonderful thing”.

## 5.7 Talkback Radio as a Lobbying Tool

While talkback radio may have been used as a mechanism for some study participants to actively access politicians and to engage with political issues, others found it was a valuable tool for lobbying on behalf of community organisations in which they were involved. For example:

Participant: “And I’ve been a community activist for many years so I use radio as another means of bringing those points across. I rarely ring because I want to talk about a recipe or something like that. When there is one of those fascinating programmes on [when I call] it’s usually because I’m agitated about the subject. I’m concerned about what is being said and I want to counter misinformation.”

Facilitator: “So can we explore that for a minute before moving on. As a community activist, are you saying that you would ring up about issues that you’re campaigning on in an attempt to get voice on those issues specifically, or just that you, with the tradition of activism would tend to react to issues to express an opinion?”

Participant: “... so now there’s less of an opportunity for people just as myself to watch what is going on and participate in the process. So radio for me has become more significant from that point of view. Although it’s, I find it very wearing because I’m not doing it for pleasure.

Facilitator: “What do you find wearing, sorry, the listening or the calling in?”

Participant: “Both, when there’s some discussion going on pertaining to planning in Canberra the region that is very close to my heart, so I have to listen very carefully. I listen to what other people say, what other views are expressed but in particular I am listening to politicians who are saying something, you roll the clock back by 5 or 10 years and in fact, that is not the case at all and the ordinary listeners might be completely in the dark about that and that’s the sort of thing that gets me really annoyed and on the phone, but also very nervous because I’m aware that I have to have my facts when I speak.”

Facilitator: “Is that because of the type of the programme that you are calling into because there’s the perception that it’s an ABC programme and perhaps the audience is a little more informed or it’s a Canberra audience and there’s perceptions about Canberra audiences being better educated or just because as an individual, you are the sort of person who likes to speak with facts behind you?”

Participant: “Well again, it would be both. I expect that my fellow

listeners are generally well informed but I suppose that I'm more concerned about the politicians and their staff who I'm aware monitor the programmes and concerned that I might say something that is not factual, and not meaning to of course, and that therefore weakens the argument. ABC 666 discussion group

Others used talkback to let community members know about events and garner support for their causes. For example:

“I think it's good for that [lobbying] and to advertise big events that you want people to show up to, to support. I worked at Centennial Park, for example, and there was a big issue at Centennial Park, some environmental thing and the board had one decision but the community had another point of view. And I was the activities officer and I had to ring up [talkback], I think at the time Margaret Throsby was on air. We talked public opinion and everybody got involved.” ABC Sydney discussion group participant

And a similar perspective was expressed by a participant in the ABC Byron Bay discussion group:

“My second point, obviously promotion, community groups are trying to raise money or whatever, individuals, political parties and so on. Hobby horse well [it depends on your] passions. If somebody gets on and I'm just sort of casually listening in and start talking about natural resource management, admittedly my ears prick up and if they say something stupid about, you shouldn't have [water] tanks in your backyard, I'll certainly be on the phone because that is one of my passions or power or the decentralisation of infrastructure and the provision of utilities down to the personal and community level as opposed to the big engineering organisations saying, you want some water and we will just dig another hole for you. So those sorts of issues, they're the ones that fire me up and we all have those. It doesn't matter what is happening on, you will pick up the phone.

The same audience member said she had found the ABC station particularly supportive and helpful when it came to providing the space for community groups to lobby on issues and to facilitate community discussion on issues. She explained how she would use the station in this respect in the future:

“... I suppose that I would have to say that in hindsight it was probably an avenue that, if I did it again, I would use more than I have in the past because I've also become more skilled in using talkback for my own means, politically and I guess at that stage I was more au fait with other strategies.” ABC Byron Bay discussion group participant

Discussion in that group turned to the use of talkback by local politicians with a participant giving an example of how when she was a local councillor she has used talk back to raise issues, but she stressed that she had always identified herself as a councillor. While others in the group said they found this an obvious tactic by

politicians, she emphasised that although she felt it was a only one of several available tactics, significantly talkback was an important one in relation to getting the names of local politicians in front of an audience.

Another participant found it frustrating that there were often no solutions to the political issues raised by talkback:

“... there’s something here that’s hard to get at. The ABC clearly can’t be an activist or take positions but on the other hand, if they produce a programme, that programme could end up giving a position... Informing people, this is the best thing that could be done and why isn’t it being done and then when the political response rings in and says, well why not, then people can take that into context and in a sense challenge the politician as to why that isn’t being done. Too many things just get stirred up and then fobbed off.”  
ABC Byron Bay discussion group participant

While some study participants did not see talkback radio as a way of developing solutions, others thought it could play a greater role in this area. Yet for other audience members talkback radio performed a rather different problem solving role and the next section of this report explores that.

## 5.8 Talkback Radio as Problem Solver

Some study participants found the talkback radio was a way of solving the every day problems they encountered. In this respect audiences gained as much from talkback as they were able to give in relation to calling in and providing solutions to other audience members' problems. This was perhaps a more human aspect of talkback and generally occurred outside of populist formats. For example:

I include things like the garden programme, so one of the reasons I ring up, not that I'm a great gardener, but in any sort of programme it doesn't matter whether it's home handyman or whatever, if I think I've got something to contribute then that's another reason that I'll ring up to try and help other people who have either come up with a problem or had a similar illness to one that I've had... 2CC  
discussion group participant

Stories abounded in discussion groups about the role of talkback in providing solutions – sometimes very innovative in nature – to callers' problems. 5AA discussion group participants said a specific program on that station was focussed mainly on helping people who had problems and audience members expressed a high level of appreciation for that. The following discussion highlights the role some talkback radio programs perform in solution provision:

Participant 1: "He really makes things happen and there's a lot of people out there who are at, to cordon an old phrase, their wits' end. They've been sitting on the phone for three hours to Optus or Telstra or something, they can't get through."

Participant 2: "Some of these people are quite frail, they just don't know where to go. They don't have a family to support them. They'll get on and Leon will immediately say, I don't know whether you know that he does this, but he'll give you the name of a politician, he will give you their phone number, their office phone number, he will give you their PR."

Participant 1: "Well it's certainly a number that wouldn't be in the phone book. So he really moves and shakes a lot of things. A lot of legal issues that people are having or the housing commission or whatever it is in your states, it's the housing trust here. There's people that have major issues around that... I would say Leon's programme is very problem-solving based."

Participant 2: "Problem-solving... anybody who has got a grievance or if they're in diabolicals, they know that if they ring Leon, he'll put them in touch with the person that might make it work for them."

Facilitator: "So you're talking about a community service kind of role?"

Participant 1: “Very much so.”

Participant 2: “Yeah.” 5AA discussion group exchange

As the above exchange shows, talkback radio audience members value the role of talkback in providing a service, which they see as a public service. Other audience groups reported similar experiences with talkback radio and its problem solving capacity. For example:

“I do not envy companies ... they are quite aware of the power of talk radio. So for instance, if Telstra gets a complaint or if someone rings up a talk radio about a Telstra complaint, Telstra will fix that service for that person once it's been notified publicly even though the person has spent months and months trying to resolve the issue.  
ABC Sydney focus group participant

In this respect some talkback radio programs were performing what audiences viewed as an important public service role.

## 5.9 Talkback Radio as a Form of Citizen Journalism

While the problem-solving nature of some talkback was appreciated by audience members, they also acknowledged that talkback allowed them to provide information and news that may otherwise be overlooked by the media. In this respect talkback radio can be described as the original form of citizen journalism – that is it provided and continues to provide the first mass media space where ordinary people can engage in the provision and exchange of news and information. USA academic Jay Rosen (2008) defines citizen journalism as the process that occurs “When the people formerly known as the audience employ the press tools they have in their possession to inform one another, *that’s* citizen journalism.” Rosen suggests that citizen journalism is content produced by media users, but the focus is on the process or activity involved in the production of the content and not necessarily the form of media through which it is published, rather than the medium in which it appears. It is, important particularly in relation to talkback radio and its role as a platform through which citizen journalism occurs, to make the distinction between callers providing news and information and their use of the space to exchange opinion. Although the latter activity is one that talkback callers loved to engage in, it falls outside the scope of citizen journalism.

Although most participants in the study did not classify themselves as citizen journalists when they provided story tips and news through talkback radio, the following comments show that they were performing the role of citizen journalist. For example:

“[It’s] not so much as you’re classing yourself as a journalist, it’s just providing the presenter with more information that may change his or her opinion.” 2UE discussion group participant

Another participant had phoned a talkback program to give them a story when she saw a council watering truck watering the road during the rain. She said:

“I just... there was no one to tell. My cats weren’t going to listen, and it was one of those things that I wouldn’t normally do and I rang up and said “I’ve seen the greatest thing from my veranda.” 4BC discussion group participant.

While the term citizen journalist was not one with which many of the people who participated in the study related to or self-identified as, when discussion turned to how they saw themselves in their role as callers to programs, many did indeed see themselves as providers of information and news and correctors of the public record. This was generally not a role that other media fulfilled for them. The following discussion highlighted that:

Participant 2: “But I think one point not covered too, in Canberra you get good talkback because there is a lot of very well-educated people in this town, and somebody can make a statement and somebody will call in and they’ve got a PhD in that area and they

will correct them, which I think is good, because you only get that through the radio, you don't get that through the newspaper."

Facilitator: "So when you ring up to, if I could say to correct the record, is that a fair representation of what you're trying to do?"

Participant 2: "Yeah."

Facilitator: "Do you feel that that has some sort of impact?"

Participant 2: "Yeah, I want to stir the paint against the local government which I hate. They're so incompetent." 2CC discussion group exchange

Another study participant who regularly called talkback said his focus when he called was on the provision of new information:

Facilitator: "O.K. So would you describe yourself more as someone who calls because you get angry or because you are trying to set the record straight or offer some information? Where do you sit?"

Participant: "I would say introduce new information..."

In this case the participant went on to explain that he took information from media programs such as Lateline and called talkback radio to discuss that information. In this respect he was performing a role that he saw as spreading information and encouraging debate. While he did not necessarily conceptualise his role as that of citizen journalist, he delivered what he thought was important information and tried to ensure that information was factually correct.

Many other participants saw their role even when they were providing information and news via talkback as being very different to that of a journalist:

Facilitator: "Sorry, if we can just bring in back to the question, do you see the people calling into the station as doing some kind of journalistic role in terms of providing information or ...?"

Participant: "Well in my case, I ring up, not because I want to pretend I'm a journalist, I ring up because I just get a buzz out of it and like I said, at the beginning, it's interacting and participating and I know that other people are listening and they don't have the courage to ring up. I even have friends ring up and say, why don't you ring up about this? So I attempt to ring up or usually send an email. It's what you get out of it and how you participate in it. So I don't think I maybe called a journalist, I don't know." 2CC discussion group participant

Some participants called talkback radio programs to correct misinformation they hear on the programs or to add to the depth of information on the show. For example:

Participant: “I ring up if something annoys me or I think they have missed something or they are talking about something and I think it’s an interesting call. I don’t remember why, he [the host] was talking to someone in Scotland about Vikings so I felt compelled to ring up and tell him about the Vikings hauling their boats over land, over the mountains...”

Facilitator: “So you’re filling in gaps in knowledge, potentially, is that how you, the reason for you to ring in?”

Participant: “Yes. Or if they say something that I don’t think is right...”

Facilitator: “So issues that interest you and issues that you know something about that you feel you’re going to contribute on?”

Participant: “Yeah.” ABC 666 discussion group

While improving the quality of talkback was important to some participants and they wanted to do so through their contributions to talkback, some did not believe that their contributions to talkback would change the nature of journalism or talkback or influence the media. For example:

Facilitator: “Are you motivated in part by a sense of inadequate news media in the city to call in and express your views?”

Participant 1: “I think a lot of people do but I don’t know that it’s really worthwhile.”

Facilitator: “Why?”

Participant 1: Because I don’t think it’s that deep.

Facilitator: “What’s not that deep?”

Participant 1: “The local ABC.”

Facilitator: “Ok, so you don’t know that ringing in and expressing your view is actually going to change journalism practice or is actually going to influence the media?”

Participant 1: “No.”

Facilitator: “No?”

Participant 1: “It might inform someone who is listening but I don’t think it will make a big difference overall.”

Facilitator: You actually highlighted something earlier...

Participant 2: Yes.

Facilitator: You said something similar, in the context of what we might call light weight stuff around music but similarly you were putting context on to an issue so that's what you're saying, it's about providing history and context and background information that perhaps other journalists have not got access too?

Participant 2: "Yeah."

Other study participants were frustrated by what they perceived as a lack of depth in the discussions that occurred via talkback radio. The following conversation about the way talkback treated planning issues in Canberra highlighted this frustration:

Participant "... it's not that they haven't got access to it, in the matter of planning issues in Canberra, anyone worth their salt could research things and obviously on radio, there's only so much time to research things. It depends on how much they try to pack into their program. So if they're going to have little grabs, which it tends to have to come across some of the programmes now, I think there's been a trend."

Facilitator: "So lack of depth?"

Participant: "Lack of depth and that lack of depth is all over the place... in the Canberra Times... So it's that frustration of trying to add, correct something, add a bit more, fill it out because it is so light weight, just skimming over the top ..." ABC 666 discussion group

Other audience members were keen to ensure their contribution to talkback radio was constructive and they did this by contributing to debate via the news and information they provided to talkback. For instance:

Participant 1: "Hopefully, you're trying to make a constructive suggestion and see where it goes."

Participant 2: "Yeah, so you feel like, you might be trying to intervene in a debate for example or bring a suggestion to government or..."

Participant 1: "Well start something or add to an existing discussion..."

Participant 2: "Making a difference, making a difference." ABC Adelaide discussion group exchange

Another activity which saw talkback callers fulfilling the role of citizen journalist was

when they became sources of news. For example:

“Listening to other people’s opinion, as I said... knowing that the ABC has a pretty fair slant on news, local news, listening to other people calling in without the facts. So I ring up and not always to go on air and just say, look I don’t know if you’re aware of this, but this is a fact.” ABC Lismore (Byron Bay) discussion group participant

Although most participants in this study did not conceptualise themselves as citizen journalists, they were often performing the roles that are associated with citizen journalists such as the public provision of news and information.

## 5.10. Talkback Callers as News Sources

Some talkback callers in this study identified that comments they made in the context of talkback programs had been lifted from those shows and used in news bulletins. In regards to the latter issue, they were transported from talkback caller to news source.

Participant 1: "I've been on the promo [station promotion]."

Participant 2: "Yeah, so have I."

Facilitator: "Ok, so they've extracted you from the talkback calls and been used in a station promo?"

Participant 1: "Yeah."

Facilitator: "Was that a problem for you?"

Participant 1: "No, it was quite fascinating really. My husband came in, oh listen, listen, listen." ABC ACT discussion group participant

One of the members of this group then went on to describe how he had called up a talkback host on April Fool's day and had caught the host with a joke, which had then been re-used later in the program.

"And then I noted at about 8.30am, they put me on again and I thought, hang on, I wonder if they should pay me for that. I'd rather enjoyed it actually because he said about 7 o'clock he didn't want any crank calls today because of April Fools Day and I thought I've got to make something up, he's been talking about this Kangaroo culling for the last week and I set them off and they're all running down Hayden Drive and he said, ah good." ABC ACT discussion group participant

Other participants said that comments they made within the context of a talkback program had been used within news stories for the station's radio news bulletins. For example:

Facilitator: "So anybody else ever made a comment though that you've seen merge in some kind of news coverage on an issue the next day?"

Participant 3: "Yeah, but not here in Canberra. It was in another town... I rang up and spoke to one of the other presenters on the radio station that I was working on at the time and I raised an issue and it became, it wasn't the next day because there weren't going to be any papers, but it was raised later in the local rag [newspaper]."

Facilitator: "The issue or your particular comment?"

Participant: "My comment."

Facilitator: “As a caller to a station you said?”

Participant: “Yeah, but they went on and followed it up more comprehensively. In fact it was a damn good article because they could see some validity in the comment that was made and it wasn’t a flash in the pan thing where they just picked up on my comment.”

Participant 2: “I’ve had my voice played back about planning issues.”

Facilitator: “In the ABC news?”

Participant 2: “In the news yes, but to my surprise that was O.K.”

Facilitator: “There’s something called a vox pop which is a radio news convention where, or a radio convention where you take an amalgam of people’s voices and edit them together to create the impression of a range of opinions on a particular issue. Was it in that context in the news or was it a stand alone comment?”

Participant 2: “No, stand alone comments.”

Facilitator: “And how did they identify you?”

Participant 2: “I think they identified me fully because I had rung in and said [who I was].” ABC ACT discussion group exchange

Study participants in the discussion groups provided numerous examples of situations where they had found themselves being treated as sources of news. A participant in the ABC ACT group explained how she had called a talkback program on another station she listened to and had tipped them off about a story regarding a politician living in public housing.

Facilitator: “And how did you feel about that? Was that empowering or annoying?”

Participant: “Oh well, I achieved what I was trying to do.”

Facilitator: “So in other words, you’re aware that you’re a potential news source? That might drive the agenda?”

Participant: “I’m not ashamed to stand up and be counted, I won’t, I would never hide my I.D. [identity]... if I was afraid to get on the radio or ashamed to for what I was going to say, I wouldn’t say it.”

Facilitator: “You wouldn’t do it.”

Participant: “Yeah and I will. I basically am a principled person and with strong opinions and therefore if I’m not prepared to stand by

my opinions, then I'm not worth listening too and I was quite confident with the information that I had, which I actually picked up a couple of days earlier and I thought this is a good forum to do it and so I rang up and I wasn't prepared to name names but I was prepared to ask the questions and at least narrow the doubt."

This participant had also been very careful about the way the issue had been discussed on radio to ensure that she did not defame anyone:

"That's why I chose the way I expressed it, I didn't name names, I just asked questions." ABC ACT focus group participant

That story had been picked up by the stations' newsroom and by other media as well. On occasion some audience members had been called by radio producers and hosts to contribute to program discussions in the role of specialist or program guest. This was because they had previously raised those topics via talkback programs:

Participant: "... has had me in a couple of times and that's to talk about some issues and then he has one night a week, he has three women in, he calls them and he's rung me a couple of times. I don't live too far away. The first time I ever did it, I got a phone call about three in the afternoon and he said..." someone who was to come in can't come, will you come in?" And that was the first time and I had no idea. When I got there, I said to them, what am I going to talk about? No idea."

Facilitator: "So was this off the back of you being a talkback caller being identified who'd been identified as a regular and then they thought they'd call you up and bring you in, or through some other capacity?"

Participant: "It was that I had contacted them on a couple of issues and yeah and said I think this is something that is worth looking at, yeah." ACB Adelaide discussion group

While talkback contributors found the issues they raised were sometimes picked up by local media, some found they had become national news sources as a result of calling talkback. For example:

Participant: "And the fact that you're offered the opportunity to just say it for yourself I think is, it's a tremendous opportunity to be able to put an opinion out into the community and I mean, some of these opinions go national as you probably know."

Facilitator: "In what way do you mean?"

Participant: "Well if you've hit significant buttons, then they do go national, they find their way out."

Facilitator: "Have you found this experience personally?"

Participant: “Yes I have, yes.”

Facilitator: “Can you tell us the story?”

Participant: “Well a couple of years ago, remember I was talking about the... we were looking at the feasibility of getting bio-diesel project up here. You know about this? We were looking at, with the ailing grape industry, finding an alternative, parallel industry that they could get into without having to exit and just basically moving into something else when markets drop out. And so there were a couple of radio interviews, a couple of local television presentations.”

Facilitator: “This was on the back of you making a talkback call?”

Participant: “Yep, yep.”

Facilitator: “And you then became the subject of interviews?”

Participant: “Yeah, it went on to the Country Hour and then became... also went on to Radio National. So it just sort of, it just created its own, it became its own monster. But coming back to the actual, the news, the noteworthy issue is the fact that it started at a local level and by midday the next day, it was actually quoted on Radio National and I thought gee, I didn’t expect it to go this, sort of oh my god, you know.”

Facilitator: “So your talkback, the original talkback call turned up on Radio National on the news, on a report?”

Participant: “That’s right, yep and that, what do we call that, sort of migration of the right topic. It wouldn’t happen if we didn’t have the vehicle here quite simply. It would be much harder to break into a national network, city-based and then say hey look, I want you to listen to this”

Participant: “It wouldn’t happen.”

Facilitator: “Sorry, so even though you said you didn’t expect it to go that far, you probably were secretly pleased that it did because it exposed that?”

Participant: “Oh, yes it did but at the same time, I’m reluctant to get the exposure because I sort of, it’s a double-edged sword, you want the exposure but you don’t.”

Facilitator: “... but you’re not really sure about that?”

Participant: “Well hey, when it’s bigger than Ben Hur, you think,

because I'm not dealing with this stuff everyday, I'm just dealing with it because I'm going through it. I don't really want it to be the accidental tourist."

Facilitator: "Would you have said it if you knew it was going to become a big news story? Would you have picked up the phone and made the phone call?"

Participant: "Um, if I believe in it, yeah." ABC Renmark Focus group

It was not necessary for participants to get air -time to discuss their news or information. Many were satisfied with talking to a producer, which they saw as having as much impact on the agenda of talkback and broader news agendas as talking directly with a host. For example:

Facilitator: "Has any of you ever turned up in a news story, whether in the newspaper the next day or as a news grab if you like within an ABC news bulletin for example. So you've been a talkback caller, you've rung in on an issue and suddenly mainstream journalists are reporting on you, as though you are news sources? No, you have? Yep, [name removed] what was your experience?"

Participant: "Well actually I don't ring up the station during the programme, I speak to producers or the person who has the on/off switch... I'll ring up and I'll say, here are a few loaded gun questions and say, ask them this and ask them that and I tell them what the answers are."

Facilitator: "This is because you have had information from a previous job that puts you in a privileged position?"

Participant: "Yes, yes and I find that that is a way of getting far more satisfaction out of ringing up and blowing off steam or they get right to the end of the programme, I'm sorry, we've just run out of time, we can't fit you on. So I actually feed them topics and that has had a great lot of success." ABC Adelaide discussion group

Study participants were divided as to whether talkback radio set or followed the news agenda. While some saw it establishing the news agenda of the day others saw it following established news agendas and agendas set by politicians. Those who had found themselves being used as news sources, while often surprised, did not find it a negative experience. They did recognise the power of providing news tips through talkback radio or via their talkback radio connections i.e. producers.

### 5.11 To Share Own Opinion and Hear Others'

Talk back radio had, for the people who attended discussion groups for this study, an important role in relation to providing a space for airing opinions and a place to access other people's opinions. An important aspect for opinion sharing for many participants was the immediacy of talkback radio. A talkback caller explained how immediate access to that space was:

“To me it's the immediacy – both me getting it off my chest and letting my family off the hook, seriously. There are some things that really, well obviously things that bug people and you don't feel like letting it rest. So a good way to encourage discussion with other people is a radio. It's as simple as picking up the phone and I find it a terrific medium, not for just relieving myself but for stimulating discussion, particularly if you can be controversial.” 2CC discussion group participant

Many study participants were not concerned about whether or not they agreed with the opinions of others, indeed many valued the disagreements that arose in talkback. However, just the fact that the space existed and they were able to expose their opinion and be exposed to the opinions of other people was extremely important for those who attended the discussion groups. For example:

“Sometimes you think of things that other people would want to hear, you can contribute, almost not calling up for your own reasons like people were saying before, but ah, just, they might like to hear that, you know, I think Rod will take that call, and once you've expressed yourself, you think you've contributed to the...” 4BC discussion group participant

And:

“I like to listen to talkback radio and I do switch between News Radio and 702 because I tend to have opinions and it's really interesting with talkback radio, that you get often other sides. It helps you formulate your own ideas and opinions... It's just amazing how clever people are. But I admire people too, sometimes when we're up there, they really can be very honest and brave, they're good.” ABC Sydney discussion group participant

The range of opinion expressed through talk back radio was also valued by many of the study participants. One said:

“... [I listen for] overall for information, and perspectives. I feel like I learn a lot from what other people are saying especially since usually a lot of listeners are a little more experienced in life than me. I can get a lot of point of views and a lot of, almost advice, from just what other people are saying about topics, especially if I've got a thought or I've got an opinion. It really puts my own thoughts in check and perspective when someone says something on air, I think

oh yeah, well that changed, I didn't know that, that changed how I think about something. So, it's really just to feed my curiosity..."  
4BC focus group participant

Exposure to a range of opinions was, as one audience member suggested, a way of connecting to the conversations that were happening in the community:

"Radio like that is definitely a feeling of, you might have had a conversation with six girlfriends or something and it's very stimulating but that is not always available to you. So listening to the radio, listening to all the opinions, you feel part of what is going on."  
ABC Sydney discussion group participant

Talkback sometimes changed the opinion of listeners by exposing them to a variety of views on topics and issues which they would not necessarily otherwise encounter. While audience members recognised that the space was important for sharing opinion, they sometimes found it frustrating when opinions expressed were not based in fact. For example:

Study participants wanted to hear informed opinion on talkback:

"Yeah, but I don't just ring up because I'm heated up because he [the host] said something. I would ring up and back it up with something. Like I would say, 'well what about this? What about that?' So my opinions are backed up and so I don't just... a lot of people just ring up and don't have support or they don't have a basis for their argument and then they get shot down... I think that if you get through, you would have to have something good to say." 2UE  
discussion group participant

The point that the opinion expressed via talkback had to be correct i.e. based on facts, was emphasised in the following exchange:

Participant 1: "As I was saying before, I would never really ring unless I had something to say but if it was contrary to what the presenter was saying themselves, without having the facts or the information to back up what I was saying."

Participant 2: "Yeah, that's true."

Participant 1: "If they see value in what you have said and you can really justify what you have said. If you can make them stop and think."

Participant 2: "I agree."

Participant 1: "And say, well hang on, maybe the track down which we've been going is not really 100 per cent accurate, maybe it's 90 per cent accurate but there is something there that needs to be considered."

Participant 2: “Yeah, I agree with that.”

Participant 1: “Then I feel, oh yes, I might have actually contributed something and had a positive effect on the programme.” 2UE discussion group

Although many participants indicated they were careful to ensure that if they expressed their opinions on talkback that those views were based in fact, opinion exchange wasn't always serious and did not necessarily have to be about political issues or particularly high brow to be valued by audiences. This idea was common among the people involved in this study – that talkback was a space for the sharing of opinion whether it was humorous, serious or information-based opinion. One participant said he called talkback for entertainment:

So I also do it for entertainment. I entertain my friends by ringing up or sending emails or texting... But I see it as entertainment because if you really strictly think the radio is going to give you all the news or all the information, I think that's not right. So you've got to mix it up and to see it as only as entertainment. 2UE discussion group participant

For another participant the talkback program he called was a safe space in which he could air his opinions, which he described as being 'liberal'. He also described the host of the talkback program he called as being “liberal like myself” and therefore this program provided him with a place where he felt comfortable expressing views that other talkback programs and stations may not accept. He said:

“... I'd say he's [the host] probably liberal like myself. He's got a point of view and I always like to follow it up with something and some people might like it and some people don't, but obviously it's more regular callers that call in that you look forward to, to help.” 4BC discussion group participant

And from a participant in a different discussion group:

“I really love 702, so I don't surf looking for [other talkback]. I like it because there is a balance. That each presenter is different, that each has something to offer. People like, on the commercial stations like Alan Jones and John Laws, the thing about them, often they do a lot of good, but they are very opinionated and if you did call in and you dared to differ, I have just noticed in the past, many years ago that they like to end as the superior person and they just talk over the top.” ABC Sydney discussion group participant

Audiences of the ABC Sydney group largely felt that talkback on this station provided a non-judgemental space in which they could share their opinion, but it was a space, which the hosts rarely dominated or controlled

with their opinion as the following exchanged highlighted:

Participant 1: “Can I just say that’s why 702 is so good because if you notice, they’re not opinionated.”

Participant 2: “No [that’s right].”

Participant 3: “No [agreeing].”

Participant 1: “They bring subjects up and they let everybody ring and have different opinions. I hardly ever hear them take a stand and say, this is how it is, themselves.” ABC Sydney discussion group participants

However a participant in the ABC Brisbane discussion group expressed a dissenting view on the issue:

Participant: “I listen because I like to keep in touch with topical issues and hearing other people’s opinions. I do ring in but I have actually found that the ABC is very political and they don’t take a very open approach to a lot of areas. Sometimes I think they’ve got very strong focus on where they take those calls and I think that they are quite narrow in a lot of the ways, where they take those calls from.”

Facilitator: “O.K. Just to clarify, so do you mean that the focus is on political issues or do you mean that there is a political line being toed if you like, or a bias that’s at work in some of this?”

Participant: “No I think, often, I think there is a bias too, but they often will check with people with what they are going to say and they use quite a strong scanning process and I feel there has been times that I’ve rung up, there’s something I’ve rung up about, for example I have a strong interest in education and my calls won’t be taken and they’re quite scared. Not that I’m calling over a personal issue but they also know that. Well they scan me out straight away probably. Yeah, so I felt not just that but I find that I think, there’s whole groups of people they don’t represent and I think a lot of the people that should be represented probably aren’t represented really.”

But in Renmark talkback radio was seen by one discussion group participant to have a higher purpose – for him it was a force for helping to establish collective agreement on issues. He explained:

“I think what it enables us to do is to bring the collective account of something into focus and get it right, or at least get it as close as we can to getting it right and wherever you go, you can sit six people down at a table and you can have one topic and you say, well what do you think of that and you will get six different views on it and

that's fine. Life is like that. We've got to live with that variability of opinions, but the opportunity to hear them is the most important thing so that we can get balance." ABC Renmark discussion group participant

The many exchanges that occurred in the discussion groups held for this study about talkback radio's role in providing a space and place for access to and the exchange of opinion, revealed that regardless of the deficiencies or strengths of particular formats or programs, audiences are able to access to talkback which suits their purposes in this regard.

## 6. Agenda Setting

Talkback radio has been identified as variously setting and following news agendas. This study explored the extent to which audience members recognise the agenda-setting role of talkback. The following discussion illustrates the former issue:

Facilitator: “I wanted to ask what level of influence you thought talkback and in particular 4BC has on news content on Brisbane, other news media, do you see that as having any impact at all?”

Facilitator: “Or is it the other way around?”

Participant 3: “I think it is the other way around. They [talkback] take articles out of The Courier Mail or The Australian or whatever newspapers they get access to and they bait the community with it and then the calls come from that, rather than the other way around. Occasionally there will be an issue that someone would have raised as a resident, as a community member that they will then champion that cause and that in turn will spill over to potentially A Current Affair or the nightly news show or The Courier Mail the next day but it tends to be more, in my observation, the radio announcers get their topics for discussion out of the paper.” 4BC discussion group

But some participants were particularly critical of what they perceived to be a generally narrow news agenda in all media:

Participant 14: “I think that you’re right, but not in as much of a dramatic sense as you’re expressing, I mean, that’s your opinion and I don’t claim you’re wrong, but I think all the information that you hear on air and on the paper comes from the same place and it’s a faxed press release from the police dept and a lot of the times it does come from that first, you do see a couple of times, you read about it the next day and you’ve heard it go to air as it’s happened or whatever, in the afternoon show, so I think it’s more like 60:40 the way you’re saying.”

Participant 3: “Yeah, you’re probably right because the radio is more...”

Participant 14: “It’s just the nature of the information.”

Participant 3: If there is a bus crash or a train crash, a bombing or something it comes through instantly on the radio and the presses take a day to get the pictures and the press...” 4BC discussion group exchange

In Canberra, ABC group participants identified that when it came to talkback radio, newspapers in that city set the talkback agenda for the day:

Facilitator: “So you’re saying that you find ABC radio talkback in Canberra tends to follow the news agenda set by the Canberra Times?”

Participant: “To a certain, that’s what I’m seeing and what I’m hearing, it’s not developing [original stories].”

And this was common, with another participant saying that she seen the same thing when she lived in a regional area where she had access to seven newspapers. She said she had witnessed first hand how stories from those newspaper drove the talkback agenda:

“... so it’s not uncommon and there’s nothing wrong with that, but in an area like Canberra you also have to do your research and find other stories I think. So I’m not getting a broad perspective of what is going on in Canberra. I don’t hear as many social issues, you know with the ABC.” ABC ACT discussion group participant

Transference of news agendas between talkback radio and other media was not always viewed positively by audiences. Participants in the ABC Brisbane discussion group identified what they described as a disturbing trend in the agenda of the station’s talkback. They perceived that the relationship between two high profile Brisbane media personalities who worked for different media organisations had an impact on the agenda of an ABC radio talkback show. The following exchange, although lengthy, explains the link and the participants’ responses to it. This part of the discussion began with the comment by one participant that the quality of talkback on Brisbane’s ABC had declined over the past few years, especially with the departure of key hosts. She explained:

Participant1: “... in contrast, with the way that the ABC has been restructured currently, I just feel that they’re... Okay, certain broadcasters do not appeal to me, but it’s more than that. It’s the timbre of the way that the show, the timbre of the show, the way it’s changed, the topics. I reared three children. I do not wish to hear about kids that are fearful, kids going to kindy. Like I do not [want to listen to the fact that] Kirsten McGregor had a child, Steve Austin has a child. They might sort of drop it in and say something, but they are not on about their kids, like all the time, and this person can’t cook and like...”

Facilitator: Are you referring to a particular presenter?

Participant 1: “I am.”

Facilitator: “Do you want to name that presenter?”

Participant 1: “I do, well people know who it is because [her style] it’s quite manipulative. That person does not listen, her interviewing style, her language. I was thinking about it because I was coming here tonight. Her language is quite inflammatory, the way that it’s structured, the tone, the emphasis on particular words, the phraseology, the topics that are

generated, the sort of callers that are allowed past the gateway. The way the issues develop and interestingly enough, who is she married to - the editor of The Courier-Mail. Now I find that an incredible conflict of interest.”

Facilitator: “So in reference to that, what are you observing, is it about the content of the programme?”

Participant 1: “Well, I’m observing about the content of the program.”

Facilitator: “Sorry, I mean specifically about that relationship which you have identified with the Courier Mail, are you commenting on that having an impact on what you hear?”

Participant 1: “Yes I am and I’m also identifying how stories in the Courier Mail are written and issues are presented and then but, unless you were looking for it and I’m not a conspiricist (sic) and I don’t look for things under rocks or stuff like that but interestingly enough, if you look at the way certain issues are highlighted in our local newspaper, funny about that, they’re given almost a similar treatment and emphasis. Not to say they’re not important.”

Facilitator: “How would you describe that emphasis? Give us an example of an issue if you can, or a tone, I mean are you talking about it being political or inflammatory?”

Participant: “Well, I’ll give you an actual example. I just happened to be listening to Steve Austin at night, I don’t know why, I was laying on the lounge and I was watching TV at the same time I was listening to Steve Austin. There was something he was... I heard him, he was going to do something with Kelly Higgins Devine. I thought I would listen to that and apparently Stephen Robertson, the minister was on. Now I do not know Stephen Robertson, I have no connection to Stephen Robertson but The Courier-Mail had been undertaking this... I mean health is a mess, it’s a poisoned chalice, whoever has the portfolio, it’s... there are lots of complex problems why it’s in a state. And they’d been hammering [Robertson], and I heard Madonna King hammering on about beds.”

Facilitator: Beds?

Participant: “And saying beds were chairs, like hospital beds. Now I guess you could assume that like a bed, was a structure like that but when they use it in statistics. Look I’m not a public servant, I’m not a politician, not a policy maker, nothing, I’m just a person who does what they enjoy doing. I’m free to do what I like. My kids are all grown up, I can do what I like. This thing about not enough beds and chairs but it really means that there aren’t enough staff to look after the patient in the bed, so it’s really a composite thing, whether it’s a chemotherapy chair or whether it’s a bed.”

Facilitator: “O.K. To bring you back to the talkback theme, how does this

relate directly to that?”

Participant 1: “O.K. I rang Steve Austin because I heard Steve Robertson, because I thought the poor man, he is getting hammered I will ask him to define a hospital bed, look I know what it is and he said, ‘well thank you for asking’. I suppose it was a sort of a set up. I don’t know but I was put through. Steve Austin greeted me courteously, he does not know me, and I asked Stephen Robertson and he said, ‘thank you’ and he explained the concept of a bed. All right, so I thought OK, Madonna King had been giving him a hard time. I think I had rung up about bats a couple of weeks ago and I hadn’t been put through and I thought right-e-o, there must be some reason. They know my phone number or find me so painfully... I pecked out an SMS, so I said and I’ve actually still got it on my phone because I was so angry, ‘Madonna, could you please ask the minister to explain the meaning of a bed or a chair. Does it include staff to look after patient in bed or chair?’ So she quickly misinterpreted it and said something about beds or chairs at home, like it was there.”

Participant 2: Is that how that happened?

Participant 1: “And I was absolutely... I’ve still got it on my phone, I was so angry because it was...”

Facilitator: “So you thought it was twisted?”

Participant 1: “Yes, in contrast, I suppose to Steve Austin where I was treated with courtesy and respect. I was allowed to ask the minister, the minister, Steve Austin asked him the question, treated him courteously. He may or may not dislike him, I don’t know. It’s never apparent with Steve Austin. He’s a consummate professional and with all his callers, he’s a consummate professional.”

Participant 2: “Isn’t that the term that comes to mind that’s beat up?”

Facilitator: “Beat up, yep.”

Participant 1: “Yes.”

Facilitator: “That’s what you’re hearing with that particular programme, is that what you’re saying?”

Participant 1: “Yes.”

Facilitator: “And what, you’re describing a political bias there as well?”

Participant 1: “I’m describing a very manipulative process, that’s what I’ll term it.”

Facilitator: “O.K.”

Participant 1: “It’s not necessarily even a political bias as they seem to get a beat up going for getting as many listeners as possible.” ABC Brisbane discuss group exchange

Some participants had well developed insights into the processes that drove agendas on talkback radio and one talkback study participant offered his perspective of the processes that drove agenda setting on talkback. He said:

“As you would realise, an announcer who comes on at 7 in the morning or 9 in the morning, has already been in the studio for two hours at a production meeting to ensure they’ve teed up the people they wish to interview. They’ve read the morning paper, listened to all the news from wherever and they’ve got the basis of the show for three hours or whatever it is. And they devote x percentage of their time to that knowing that there will be the odd thing that comes up that’s generated through the day, and current affairs programs do the same. I’ve seen current affair television programs that advertised for 24 hours tomorrow you’ll get this, tomorrow you’ll get that but something has broken, a news flash and then you’ll get it one night later, so a production meeting for 2 hours gives them the basis, we’ve got a show, and things will happen.” 4BC discussion group participant

In this participant’s case the knowledge about the processes that were involved in establishing the agenda for talkback made him more aware of why certain topics were being discussed each day. In the case of an ABC Sydney participant there was appreciation for the way one talkback host took the news of the day and crafted a program of discussion around it:

“Between news and talkback, Tony Delroy has a wonderful evening session between, after the Challenge, till about the book reading at ten to two and it’s called Issue of the Day and I think what you said, about what is the relationship between the news and perhaps the talkback, he takes the news issues and he makes it the issue of the day and, I would have to say, it’s one of the best. That’s when you listen because the talkers are brilliant. He gets the most amazing, you always say there are two sides to every argument, there’s about 102 sides to every argument in his programme and he lets them all through and his board is still full when he says, I’m really sorry.” ABC Sydney discussion group participant

However, participants in the same group said they were conscious that not everyone understood the difference between news and talkback and they wanted to emphasise that talkback was not news and expressed concern that some listeners did not understand that:

Facilitator: “Do you think of talkback, I guess to clarify my question, do you think of talkback as an alternative source of news? Does it have the same credibility?”

Participant 1: “No.”

Participant 2: “No we need that primary [news] source.”

Facilitator: “Sorry, so what are we saying up this end?”

Participant 3: News is different to talkback.

Facilitator: “How so?”

Participant 3: “It [talkback] allows for discussion, for a democratic discussion of a news item and I think for instance, the recent US political campaign, the McCain, Obama contrast. It was just quite wonderful to hear people from various backgrounds, calling in, giving their positions about why they would like this or why they would like that. So it’s able to comment on the factual statement that comes out of the news.”

Facilitator: “So you see it more as opinion and comment than first source information?”

Participant 3: “And an alternative to discuss, to share opinions because I think, not everyone is comfortable with talking about these things with their friends, or their families. There can be quite a conflagration sometimes.”

Facilitator: “O.K. So a degree of anonymity with strangers, in conversation?”

Participant 3: “Yes, but to get your opinion up and heard and the contrast of being placed and as a listener, hear the various perspectives coming in and be educated and advanced and move forward in your thought.”

Participant 4: “My concern is that people interpret talkback sometimes as factual news and that really concerns me because they don’t read newspapers as you know. So people are more and more relying on television and radio. But I sometimes think, what there are saying is not right, it’s far from right but it’s on air and people are listening.

Participant 3: “There’s something wrong with you if you mix the news up with talkback.” ABC Sydney discussion group

However, audiences of ABC Renmark found talkback on their station set the agenda for other media in the area and for community discussion as was evidenced by these comments:

Facilitator: “Oh really, so you see the radio being the agenda-setter for the local newspaper?”

Participant 1: “Yep, yep and because they’re on the button.”

Facilitator: “And how much of, how important do you think the roll is of the callers in the ABC educating the community and the ABC being an informed reporter, if you like, of some of these issues?”

Participant 1: “Well in my, sorry, my experience, I think it’s everything. It’s everything because it substantiates, because if you put up a premise across the airwaves and wait for responses and feedback, you get that from people because there are people out there who are either living it or are close to it and they will give it weight and substantiate it and it allows that sort of, springboard to be able to take the matter further and build it and you need a community to do that. You just can’t simply do that from a desk, you’ve got to have a community.” ABC Renmark discussion group exchange

And later in the same discussion group:

“Well the beauty of it [talkback radio] is, is that it can get out there so fast because if you’ve got something that’s happening. You don’t have to wait overnight. You don’t have to wait until half-way through the week. It can just hit the ground running and go for it and that’s the beauty of it. If it’s happening in your backyard, bang. It’s going to fire off and it’s really, that’s what I think is so good about it. I don’t get on the bandwagon all the time, I keep it to some issues. I don’t want to be seen as sort of like the whip, but I believe that we have a responsibility to our community and to seeing that the appropriate things are being addressed and unless we get up and, one or the other, we’ll get up and take it forward, it will just slip by and it will just be swamped over by the next issues of the next day and you’ve got to seize the moment, that’s the way it is.” ABC Renmark discussion group

But an audience member in a different discussion group said that callers to programs had significant power to influence and set the agenda for the discussion on programs. He explained:

“With talkback radio, a lot of the times my observations are that the callers actually dictate the subject matter and a lot of times the announcers are ignorant on an issue and they’re led by the nose. I mean you might call up and say this is the way it should be done and they’ve always been done and I came from this background and it always worked and you might remember a happy time in your childhood when something worked and they’ll be led by that and then they kind of focus their whole debate from your view point which is completely wrong...” 4BC discussion group participant

But agenda-setting on talkback occurred in other ways too. One participant pointed

out, there were often occasions when talkback radio hosts used senior figures from news media organisations as guests and that set the agenda for the discussions that followed:

“... for example, these guys and 2GB is again the worst example, both draw off the tabloid headlines of the Telegraph and they have the editor of the Telegraph on regularly and Steve Price even does this on TV. They have these people on which set their agendas for the day. They use their headlines to set their agendas if they're provocative because that's what the... So you could argue that the Telegraph is actually the trendsetter for shock jock journalism on 2GB.” 2UE discussion group participant

This comment triggered further discussion about the news agenda-setting function of talkback and in particular whether talkback programs set the agenda or if they followed the agenda of other media. The following exchange highlighted this aspect of the agenda setting process:

Participant 1: “When they arrive those outdoor broadcasts, with pages of the Telegraph to feed their story.”

Participant 2: “That's right, I mean, it's not their reacting to the, Hadley and Smith are using the Telegraph headlines as...”

Facilitator: “As triggers for calls.”

Participant 1: “Yeah, it's a regular thing, that's their [way of operating] they're feeding off it. I mean a guy like John Stanley doesn't feed off it.” 2UE discussion group exchange

Audience members recognised that the power to set or even follow agendas was not without responsibility as was highlighted by the following comment:

“I don't think, in terms of the feed to the news, because the commercial stations are gauged every fifteen minutes for ratings, I don't think they're as dedicated to serious topics as they are to making a lot of people listen to them and I think [named removed] was saying in terms of spruiking on other stations. I think 4BC's got a huge responsibility, but I think occasionally they abuse it in terms of taking politics a bit more seriously. There's a lot of younger folk that don't have a handle on what politics is about and they go for a popularity contest, whereas a talkback station should handle topics seriously without being too boring and yet, just one example, locally they've spent a lot of time making fun of Campbell Newman's jingle and precious little on perhaps what were his policies. That's just one perspective.” 4BC discussion group participant

## 7. Cultural diversity and Talkback

One of the research tasks was to explore a perception that has arisen around talkback – that the space lacks a diversity of voices. While this may be the case in populist talkback, this study deliberately set out to identify and sample talkback that occurred outside of the populist space. Although some of the programs participants talked about were populist in format, others tended towards the serious, the humorous, the human and the social. The study identified that audiences recognise some talkback tends not to tackle controversial issues such as those that are often associated with cultural diversity. For example a 4BC discussion group participant said the station did not tackle sensitive issues such as race, instead it stuck to safer territory. He said:

“I think 4BC sticks to a lot of safe issues, just to come back to your question. They, I think they like issues they can predict the answers to, they can predict the calls to. I don’t think they really step out of that little, you know, that little kids’ pond into the bigger pool a lot of the time. I think they, a lot of the controversial points they cover are like someone was saying before, the childcare or the fuel, things that affect people whether you’re brown, black, purple...”4BC discussion group participant

This comment was made in the discussion group for 4BC audiences, which was held in the first half of 2008. It is significant given that in January 2009 a 4BC talkback radio host called for a ban on Muslim women wearing veils in public places such as shopping centres and banks for security reasons<sup>ii</sup>. The radio host received a death threat and the issue made national headlines across various news media.

In relation to the issue of diversity some study participants said that there was a noticeable lack of accents in the talkback they listened to. As discussion unfolded about the range of accents on talkback in the 5AA discussion group, one participant who said she had not thought much about the issue of cultural diversity before the discussion group, described talkback as “very Anglo-Saxon”. The whiteness of talkback radio was recognised by participants in several of the discussion groups. Other participants said that while they recognised this, they also understood that some people with heavy accents might be reluctant to call talkback radio. The following exchange in the ABC Adelaide discussion group highlighted this point:

Facilitator: “... we’re interested in the way that talkback does or does not reflect the diversity of a city or a state or the country in which it’s been being broadcast and I’ve already seen people shake their heads and let’s think specifically and initially about cultural diversity. From what you hear, in terms of the talkback callers that you hear, do you think that those talkback callers are representative of the broader community?”

Participant 1: “I think, not of the very small region, no not at all. Certainly some of the... my generation, when migrants came after the war, you certainly hear people of that generation.”

Facilitator: “So you hear European accents, for example?”

Participant 1: “Yes, or they might even say... but not recently, not recently.”

Facilitator: “So you don’t hear the voices or the accents of recent migrants?”

Participant 1: “No and not people that would identify themselves as a recent [migrant].”

Participant 2: “[I’ve heard a] taxi driver who was Indian, he was on recently, there’s an old Indian chap that has had a restaurant... but no Sudanese I don’t think, oh yes there was, yeah.”

Facilitator: “In terms of talkback callers, we’re talking about people who actually pick up the phone and ring in and voice their opinion.”

Participant 3: “But then Sudanese, most of them haven’t been here that long, because we’ve got quite a few in our Church, and so their English would be slow and understanding enough to then come up with what they might want to speak about.”

Participant 4: “There are no sub-titles on radio.”

But another participant in this group pointed out that there were complexities that might account for the absence of non-Anglo voices in talkback. She said it took newly arrived migrants some time to grasp what was going on in the community and to be able to contribute to discussion and debate about that. The discussion continued:

Facilitator: “It depends I guess on whether we’re asking about if whether people ring up with opinions or whether their experiences are relevant, they’ve got issues of concern. I would have thought new migrants might have all manner of stories to share that might be of interest to the rest of the community, if their English was up to speed.”

Participant 1: “We don’t even get many people with Aboriginal issues, not Aboriginal people”

Participant 2: “No.”

Participant 3: “Not at all.”

Participant 5: “Hardly at all.”

Participant 1: “But that might then come mainly into like ... inviting people to talk, like someone from the Sudanese community... that

somebody talks about his personal experiences, I mean learn something good, you know.”

Facilitator: “Isn’t that what you’re doing though, when you ring in?”

Participant 1: “Well there’s some of these Sudanese, I think they’re traumatised, they don’t even want to talk about it on-air or off-air.”

Participant 2: “No.”

Participant 3: “It’s about the culture.”

Participant 1: “Take for example, the Vietnamese community if you like, they’ve been here a number of years but I can’t recall a Vietnamese person ringing up for whatever reason. I just put that as an example.”

Facilitator: “Yes it’s a very valid observation.”

And in another discussion group, a participant said she had noticed that the number of talkback callers with noticeable accents had declined in the past few year. Other participants agreed with her:

Facilitator: “So accents, you’re saying you’re hearing fewer accents?”

Participant 1: “A lot [fewer], yeah.”

Participant 2: “Yeah.”

Participant 3: “I’m remembering that now, yeah.” ABC Brisbane discussion group

While participants identified that talkback attracted limited input from people who were identifiable as non-Anglo callers, they also identified that in many cases where talkback tackled issues associated with cultural diversity they were treated negatively. For example:

Facilitator: “The next question is whether the people from different ethnic backgrounds and groups call in. Another is whether the issues that are covered on the talkback stations that you listen to are multi-culturally connected if you like. So do they cover issues that might interest people from a diverse range of groups?”

Participant 1: “Most of the comments you get are negative.”

Participant 2: “Yeah.”

Participant 3: “I think I have heard people ring in with comments about the Sudanese.”

Participant 5: "I've got them all around me and there's some conflict between (sic) time to time between young Aboriginals and young Sudanese and people just report it in negative terms."

Facilitator: "When they call in, do you mean?"

Participant 5: "Yeah." ABC Adelaide discussion group

The same discussion group participants talked about how some issues were not discussed on talkback and they expressed their concern that those issues were not being debated. One participant thought that was because talkback radio was a comfort zone for listeners:

Participant: "I would agree with that totally, in general it's like a comfort thing. It's like a comfort zone in general."

Facilitator: "It's a comfort zone?"

Participant: "Yes, there's very little, really challenging stuff, other than the evening gentleman who I keep mentioning.... The vast majority of it is not truly challenging then." ABC Adelaide discussion group

The issue of talkback radio as a comfort zone also arose in the ABC Brisbane discussion group. However, these audience members said that in providing a comfort zone, talkback radio was very 'WASPish' (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) in tone.

Facilitator: "... what is your observation around what you hear on talkback radio and how representative it is of a multi-cultural community that we live in?"

Participant 1: "What here in Queensland or...?"

Facilitator: "In your own community. How representative do you think the talkback radio that you listen to is of cultural diversity?"

Participant 1: "I don't think it is anymore."

Participant 2: "I find that there's not a lot of interaction with the Aboriginal community here in Queensland. They tend to have their own networks as well, like Murri radio and that. But as far as the mainstream radio stations go, you don't get a lot of involvement there, you don't get them phoning in or they don't make any, bring up a lot of issues regarding the Aboriginal community as well."

Facilitator: "Sorry, if I could take it down to the other end of the table because there were some strong reactions to my right as well, including some snorting which will be hard to transcribe. Your reactions to that question around what you hear and how culturally

diverse it is in the talkback that you listen?”

Participant 3: “Well the snort could be translated as generally WASPish, that’s how I see the current morning radio now. It’s lacking in diversity and whereas previously there would be discussions amongst different cultural groups for the listeners to learn more about them and learn more about.”

Participant 4: “Cultural diversity, like it’s not like a token thing, which a chef might bring in for a national dish, like it was actually generally liking people and being interested in what they do and how they think. And there’s this blandness and uniformity, well WASPishness, it’s like sort of all uniform.”

Participant 1: “Yeah.”

Participant 3: “There’s no zing and colour and it’s just this narrow band of psychopaths I suppose.”

Facilitator: “So cultural diversity and the issues around gender diversity and sexual orientation are very relevant as well but if we can just, if anyone has got any comments in response to that or other examples of that?”

Participant 4: “My feeling is still going back to what I said before that they are staying with what is comfortable with them. That their world is so small that they haven’t really got a natural curiosity to get to know these other people, that’s more how it seems to be to me.”

Facilitator: “So you would put in that category people of different sexual orientation and cultural background and language?”

Participant 4: “Yes, I mean from other cultures, the experiences that they have had in life, you know the people, the refugees from all through, from even before I was born. They have experiences that Australians haven’t got a clue about... [there is a] story behind practically everyone and they could be coming out [via the radio]. There is just so much more that could be given to the general contribution to what the radio offers. I’m just amazed that when you think about how limited the topics are.” ABC Brisbane discussion group

While some audience members involved in the study disliked the blandness and WASPishness that came with the comfort zone provided by some talkback radio, participants in another group appreciated that it provided a space for like-minded people to talk about issues around cultural diversity, which they did not always feel free or comfortable to discuss elsewhere. For participants in the 2CC discussion group, talkback radio provided them with an outlet by which they could let off steam about particular issues such as the Cronulla Riots. However, they also reported that

while they felt talkback offered them a safe discussion space, there had been times when the extreme sensitivity of topics such as race prevented them from calling to participate in talkback. This was because they feared being labelled racists for engaging in these discussions. The following exchange revealed participants' concerns that if they called talkback radio about such 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?"

Participant 1: "No."

Participant 2: "No."

Facilitator: "Why not? What would hold you back?"

Participant 1: "I just wouldn't comment on it, fear of being a racist or fear of retribution or..."

Participant 2: "You will just be labelled a racist."

Although these audience members were cognisant of the potential labels that may be applied to them for expressing their views, they also indicated that they would comment about some topics around race and racism, particularly those they saw as being 'political correctness' taken to its extremes. One participant mentioned a letter that had been published by the Canberra Times. The letter mentioned a debate that was taking place in England where Muslims had (purportedly) asked to ban hot cross 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]."

The concept of talkback radio as a homeland and heartland was an important one for these audiences – it is a place where they largely feel safe to express their attitudes and opinions about issues and they value the space in that sense.

Participants in this study also identified that talkback had a role in facilitating another type of diversity– that which came from a diversity of topics, which reflected a variety of sections of the community. For example:

"I access the ABC for a range of different reasons because it's diverse, it reflects a lot of community values and activities." ABC Adelaide discussion group

And from another station:

"But everybody phoning in has raised the profile, it's the meeting of ideas, but also the meeting of viewpoints between us because if you

get six people on the morning show who phone up about particular key issues, they've all got a different slant on things. There's always some aspect of what they have to say that will be different to the next person, but there's also some common ground there and that's what you're after." ABC Renmark discussion group

But participants in another discussion group found that the station to which they listened did not reflect the diversity of the population, particularly in respect to issues of sexual diversity. The following discussion highlighted this:

Participant 1: "In talking about the diversity of the community and whether they feel comfortable listening to these talkback programs, I'll just give one example that I was horrified with, it was after that young diver won the gold medal and it turns out that he outed himself just before he went to the Olympics."

Participant 2: "Yes, yeah."

Participant 1: "And Rod Quinn came on and decided to have talkback and he introduced the talkback with the fact that this young guy was homosexual and made a big fuss of it. He wasn't making a fuss of his gold medal, he was making a fuss of the fact that the guy was a homosexual and I was thinking, I hadn't even heard that he was a homosexual up until then. To me it was irrelevant but it was really relevant that Rod Quinn reported that this was the swimmer's sexuality. I wonder what the community is going to make of the fact that this gold medal winner is a homosexual and you could see him egging people on to ring up to make a comment about it."

Participant 2: "Yeah." ABC Brisbane discussion group

And participants in the 4BC discussion group felt that young people were often unfairly maligned within discussions on talkback radio, although they recognised that youths were not a target audience for much talkback. For example:

"I think, you touch on something I feel strongly on. Just because of the demographics of the whole station, I feel that a lot of the generalizations that are made about younger people and the kind of things that are in the media these days. Like recently it's binge drinking and all that, and sometimes I just want to phone up and say 'hey, I'm 26 and I haven't been drunk since uni, just settle down a little guys'. And I think that's just a good example of just the opinion of their demographic of the station that comes across, like you were saying young people were misrepresented or not represented in the opinions, but that just reflects the demographic of the station. So I really don't get too personal 'cos I know if there were twice as many people my age listening, that would be reflected in the calls and the opinions and everything as well. So I don't take it too personally when people say that, I guess it just shows how callers as a group

can communicate those generalizations.” 4BC discussion group

It was obvious that for some audiences, talkback radio provided a homeland and a heartland, while for others it was a bland homogeneous homeland.

## 8. 'Other' Spaces and Places

This study was also tasked with exploring the type of talkback that culturally diverse communities are accessing. In relation to the tasks of identifying the talkback spaces that multicultural communities engage with, funding and time constraints meant it was not possible to fully scope the varied landscape of Australian talkback radio in this respect.

Instead, the study dipped into the pool of talkback being accessed by multicultural communities and chose one station and one program as a focal point for this aspect of the study. The study explored the views of audiences from the SBS Arabic program and 2MFM audiences in relation to the role talkback on the program and station played for them. Both broadcast in Arabic, although the latter also broadcasts some programs in English. 2MFM, is a community radio station specifically set up to service Blacktown's Muslim community and SBS broadcasts its Arabic program weekly. These two talkback spaces represent only a tiny fraction of the spaces in which multicultural communities engage in talkback and discussion. Meadows, Forde, Ewart and Foxwell (2007) explored community radio ethnic language programs to reveal the role these programs have for audiences in relation to the maintenance of languages and cultures. This station and program were chosen because of the recent media interest in and focus on Muslims and people from Arabic countries. They were selected because they appeared to be sites where Muslims and Arabic speakers are creating spaces to represent themselves and their issues.

While it emerged that talkback on 2MFM and the SBS Arabic program played an important role in maintaining and developing culture for audiences involved in this study, perhaps more importantly it was central in crossing boundaries between and connecting these audiences and the wider community.

Participants identified that talkback on the SBS Arabic program and 2MFM station was an important and highly valued alternative to mainstream talkback radio. They also indicated that the aforementioned talkback provided a space in which they were able to discuss a range of issues from the personal to the political in rational ways. Other issues raised included the safety of the space, the range of debate and discussion that occurred in these spaces and the role of talkback in helping audience members who were recent migrants to formulate ideas about and enact Australian citizenship.

Within the 2MFM and SBS Arabic Program radio talkback spaces, audiences found that their talkback provided information they would not be able to access elsewhere. Two participants highlighted this:

“Most of the media doesn't give the right way, that's why at the radio station here they give the right way in Arabic and English. We are very proud, every issue they got specialist people, we talk back to them, we discuss our problem, with police officer, with detective, with immigration, she got interview with responsible people, from the government who talk back to them, a lot of benefit from this.”

And:

“Last week we interviewed Mr. Jason Claire, the federal MP for Bankstown who coordinated the local 2020, he came on air and after, at the end of the interview, he told the community that one of our community was elected to represent the people at the 2020 summit, two people actually, a man and a woman. So he had this good information to communicate with our community on the radio station.” (Translated) 2MFM discussion group participants

Here, the issue emerged of these spaces as relatively safe ones in which participants felt free to express their opinions and engage in discussions, which would otherwise not occur in other types of talkback radio. For example:

“Pretty much just that, conveying to communities more about our involvement, our potentials, more about... there were some popular Islamic teachings that go against extremism and y’know. Providing them with not only Islamic knowledge but knowledge from diverse areas. Teaching about the health of our children in sporting events, being competitive, not only academically but with sports and through sports, particularly as we come into contact with other communities. And so it really preaches moderation and also, teaching Muslims that we could go out there, we do have the potential and it’s only through interaction that we could really have a voice.”

However, they also identified that the disagreements that occurred in those spaces over differing opinion and views were extremely important to them. In other words, they did not want these spaces to provide bland, sanitised discussion, rather they enjoyed listening to a variety of opinions, even when they disagreed with the host and other callers. 2MFM host Faten el Dana explained that during the Cronulla riots the station had tried to present listeners with a balanced view of events. She explained:

“Mainly people were denouncing all the things there were hearing on the radio station, they were saying ‘this is not fair, the whole community would be blamed even if this was true, the whole community would be blamed for the actions of a few’... So my role was to expose the truth to the people. If the other people don’t want to listen because my community listen and know that, at least, I was trying to ease the tension and get them to know the facts and I think this the job of every announcer is to broadcast the truth regardless if it was [viewed by the audience as] right or wrong.”

In this respect talkback on the station had helped to defuse some of the tensions that had arisen in the Muslim community during the Cronulla riots. The station also played another important role for its community. For some people 2MFM was their only source of information and the only way they could connect with other people:

“I have received a call from someone in a detention centre two years ago, I was really surprised that the officer said to me on the other line, ‘there’s this one person who wants to speak to you’. I have no idea who that person was, and when I spoke to him he turned out to be a refugee from Villawood who has no contact with the outside world and the only information he is getting and the only number was the radio station that he memorized, they allowed him to listen to the radio, it was extraordinary.” 2MFM talkback host Faten el Dana

And there was anecdotal evidence that non-Muslims listened to the station too. For example:

“The lady’s saying she went to the copy centre and she found the owner of the shop, who was Chinese was tuned in to our radio station, and she asked her, ‘do you really listen to this radio station’ and she said ‘oh yeah, I like their programs’. She was listening to the English speaking program.” 2MFM discussion group participant comment translated

The issue of the program and station’s roles in helping audiences engage with and conceptualise their identity as Australians – for those recently arrived migrants – and to engage with the wider Australian community was also a strongly featured point within discussions with both of these audience groups. Those who listened to the SBS Arabic program said it performed an important role in providing information to the community about immigration and life in Australia. One participant found that the program was particularly helpful in educating him about how to deal with problematic aspects of life such as cultural conflict. He explained:

“Radio, really is... most things is... because I’ve got the family, three kids [who are] young. So it’s this issue of how you raise your kids in different environments. It’s not that I’m not, or my wife’s not, flexible enough to adopt the Australian way of life. I’m adopting a lot of things, but in every environment there is good and bad. But there is...always... 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... so I live it [these experiences], I love that.”

And 2MFM study participants agreed that their station had a vital role in providing information about life in Australia for new immigrants and in helping established families engage with other communities in Australia. For example:

“What I like with this station is I find out what’s going on in Australia. The station gives you the connection, as a people you know. That station gives us lots of information about Australia, what’s going on in Australia especially with the community you know. Some people have only just come here one year, two years, three years and they really want to be with the people...” 2MFM discussion group participant

And:

“...what I found was very interesting, I was very impressed when [the station] had a program on citizenship, teaching more about citizenship and the way to go about obtaining citizenship, pretty much reaching to the wider non-Muslim community, how do you follow the steps of learning more about our citizenship rights etcetera.”

Participants in other discussion groups held for this study frequently recognised that some talkback promoted a narrow view of Australian identity and, as discussed earlier in this report, either avoided sensitive issues or proscribed the topics discussed.

This study has highlighted that community radio, at least in the case of 2MFM, is also providing a place and space where Muslim and Arabic speaking audiences can engage with debate and discussion. It has also revealed that 2MFM and the SBS Arabic program are, for their audiences, providing crucial services in relation to information provision, citizenship and national and cultural identity formation.

## 9. Producers' Roles – Gatekeepers or Traffic Cops

Talkback audiences involved in this study identified a number of issues associated with the process of calling talkback. In particular they identified the power of producers in deciding who got to speak on air and the ability of producers to determine the flavour of talkback – that is the topics and opinions that get to air.

Talkback radio producers perform a variety of roles. By audiences they are seen both as gatekeepers and traffic cops. Where existing research discusses the role of talkback radio producers it is frequently in conjunction with the hosts' role and focuses on the gate-keeping aspect of that position. But what is most interesting is the audience's perspective of the role of producers and how that influences their ability to access the airwaves. In particular, audiences involved in this study identified that the power wielded by producers enabled them to determine the flavour of talkback. For instance:

“But that really traumatises me because you know, there are twenty people in the room here, fifteen people in the room here right now that have all said that it helps shape their view on an issue or change their view on an issue and if an announcer is convincing enough and talks well enough, pretends that he knows it all, and is able to articulate it, filters the calls through that only support his viewpoint, then straight away they've actually shifted the entire mindset of a community that listens to them. And that really sort of worries me because people, community generally, this room excluded, are generally fairly doughy and they have a very passive understanding of the world, local government, state, federal, different departments, who's responsible for what and why things are done the way they're done. If you get an announcer who generally is sitting in his comfy chair spruiking, and he is actually misinforming the community in many ways.” 4BC discussion group participant

This was a familiar story to many of the participants in our study. Some, as the following example highlights knew that they would not get to air with particular comments or opinions and so approached the producer off air. For example:

“I do exactly what [name removed] is saying he does and I do it a lot. I call the producer and I actually have a feeling with some recent people on the ABC that, I'm pretty predictable in my views, and I think sometimes they don't want me to go to air and so I sense that in the producer and so I'll have my say to the producer and say 'please, if you've got an opportunity, put that comment in or ask that question'.”

Facilitator: “So you don't persist with trying to get on air?”

Participant: “No.”

Facilitator: “If you get rejected in the first instance?”

Participant: “Yes, there is some control and it’s at the producers [discretion].” ABC 666 ACT discussion group exchange

Participants reported that they were also often frustrated by talkback’s treatment of issues – for instance they identified a tendency in some talkback to jump from issue to issue or they found there was a tendency to only give limited time a single issue. They ascribed this to producers trying to get as many people on air as possible. They identified that this could affect how their on-air input was heard by talkback audiences. For instance:

Participant: “Yeah. I know at the time and for quite some time, water was the biggest issue so at times, they were sort of grasping at straws to change the subject at times but always reverting back to that subject after the news, so that sort of staying on that stream or that line of thought.”

Facilitator: “So you found that boring?”

Participant: “No, no, I guess just in programming I’m thinking that might have been why they wanted to cram me in before the news and not sort of give an extended thing after.”

Facilitator: “Could I just comment on that? That issue about cramming in is a timing [issue], in my experience... and also stuff I did back in Melbourne with ABC, 3RRR, timing is everything.”

Participant: “That’s it.”

Participant 2: “And getting the grab and making sure that the grab is right is really, I guess the art of the moment isn’t it? But I had the same thing happen to me.”

Facilitator: “As a talkback caller?”

Participant: “Yeah, or where there’s just been, or I’ve just put in a comment and it doesn’t necessarily either come through, doesn’t get to air, or that it’s not what I, the context isn’t there, so.” ABC Renmark discussion group

Study participants who called talkback radio were very aware of the power of producers in relation to what priority was given to their call, how long a caller waited in the phone queue and in passing information they provided to the host of the program. For example:

Participant: “They’re the sort of issues that usually get me to ring up but because I have quite a few people that identify my voice, I’m more inclined to ring the producer and say that is whatever and vent my situation on the producer rather than going to air because.”

Facilitator: “Why?”

Participant: “I wonder how much control they have over the content of the programme.”

Facilitator: “O.K. So you’re afraid to go to air because you’re worried, well afraid is probably the wrong word, but you don’t want to be identified?”

Participant: “No, I just hate people saying I heard you on the air this morning and that. I just hate that and so.”

Facilitator: ”This from a former broadcaster?”

Participant: “Yeah, even I don’t understand. I’m likely to run around and switch all the radios off in the house so my wife doesn’t hear me because she gets very, what are you ringing up about that for. But it is really, something that triggers it, if I’m quick on the phone, I don’t mind going to air but sometimes I can’t get to a phone fast enough and I’m probably on the tail end of it and I’ll just pass my information on to the producer. Sometimes it’s information which has been broadcast that is wrong and I want to correct it and other times it’s an issue that has just spiked me up.” ABC ACT 666

Participants sometimes found their experiences in calling and attempting to get to air frustrating, but others recognised that the producers had a job to do. For example:

“I think that sometimes I’ve been pushed to the back of the queue, because it’s [my call] to do with something [discussed] yesterday that I couldn’t get through on and they said ‘well we’re really talking about climate changes’, and although I’d like to talk about vehicle accidents or for some reason, they’ll say, ‘we’ll fit you in if we can’. We’ve had that happen.” 2CC discussion group participant

One of the most frequent complaints from study participants in relation to access to the airwaves was the producer’s decision in not to allowing them to go on air. For example:

Participant 1: “I have to stress about one thing, I listen to talkback in Spanish but I can’t, seven year, I have no access, the Spanish, won’t accept me to talk.”

Facilitator: “Ok, that’s interesting and we’ll probably come back to that.”

Participant 3: “Why’s that”?

Participant 1: “Because I have alternative point of view... Spanish program, I call and talking with him and express my point of view,

he ask me... he told me he don't agree with opinion, he only listen, he no take caller, and second time he not ... when I protest he not let me participate on the program.”

Facilitator: “So, when you call up...”

Participant 1: “He no give me access, one time he let me wait on the phone twenty minutes, I call management, I complain, he not impress me.”

Facilitator: “So you've given up.”

Participant 1: “I have, yes.” SBS discussion group

Callers also found it frustrating to be kept on hold for long periods and while most were patient, some found the experience put them off calling. They disliked it when their call was put back in the queue in favour of someone who called with a more topical issue. For example:

Participant: “Someone rings in about something or there's something in the news and what's really annoying, I don't mind if I'm in a real queue and someone will ring in right after the news and say that story in the news that just came on about that bloke being killed, I saw that. Hang on, I've been in this queue for 15, 20 minutes, been told that I would be next up after the news and someone has somehow, unless the station has rung him and said, ring us in about the...”

Facilitator: “Perhaps they've come to the next person in the queue.”

Participant: “That really irritates, I think it's manipulating to move from one subject to another.” 2CC discussion group

One participant had an interesting suggestion in relation to producers:

Participant: “And not only that, they should be made to ring up talkback radio and hang on that line like we all have to do.”

Facilitator: “That's an interesting experiment.”

Participant: “And see how that [feels].” 5AA discussion group

When it came to being rejected as a talkback caller, participants had some views on that process. For example:

Facilitator: “So, you have been rejected [name removed]?”

Participant 1: “I have a few times.”

Facilitator: “How did that feel, and what's that experience like when

you've rung in with a view that you think might be valid and to be told, look we're not really interested?"

Participant 1: "It's generally not views that I'm rejected on. There's things that aren't even on the sphere of stuff they are discussing that I think is interesting and they say, 'no, we're too full to actually do this'. There was a producer a few years ago who I didn't think liked me, he just said that to me every second day."

Participant 2: "What he didn't like you?"

Participant 1: "No, just, regardless of what I was calling about. [he said] 'Sorry we can't put you to air'."

Participant 2: "Which station was that?"

Participant 1: "That was 2CC."

Participant 2: "Was it really?"

Participant 1: "Yeah."

Participant 2: They seem to be better than others.

Participant 1: Well it was, that producer didn't really like me at the time.

Facilitator: "In terms of your opinion, he didn't agree with your opinion, do you think?"

Participant 1: "Yeah, the way he was presenting a show he did cut me off as well." 2CC discussion group exchange

The power of the producer to set community opinion or what appear to be community opinion was recognised by many talkback radio audience members. An ABC Adelaide participant indicated that the validity of what might appear to be a representative sample of community views aired via talkback was very much determined by the producer, who decided who went to air and who did not. He said this factor was critical in the way that discussions on issues unfolded on air and in the way that listeners perceived the weight of audience opinion on these issues.

A few audience members said they had found ways around the producers, for example calling up to say they would talk about an issue and then discussing something else one they were on air. And in the SBS Arabic group a participant had come up with a unique strategy to get on air. He explained:

Participant: "My name is [name removed] and I'd like to talk about why I'm a listener and addicted to talkback. I have to talk everyday if they let me, sometimes they won't so I change my name, sometimes my accent and I have been during the recent war between

Israel and Lebanon they won't let me 'cos I have to change my accent. I speak in Jewish accent, sometimes Iraqi accent, sometimes Armenian accent..."

Facilitator: "Why's that?"

Participant: "I change my name because they won't let me go, what's going on Israel between Lebanon and Hezbollah."

Facilitator: "I wanted to ask [name removed], how do you feel about having to be someone else?"

Participant : "I'm the same person just my accent becomes different. The person is the same, the opinions are the same, my mind is the same, but it's my accent that becomes different because I don't want them to stop me saying my opinion."

Facilitator: "So you think it's because you have to [do so], not because you're calling too often and they want to...?"

Participant : "Yeah, that's right and I told them when, yesterday this one person, he started, he called in, he say 'you take the side of Lebanon, you taken to the left and you're not giving the chance of the right people to talk'. The second one, he comes and complain and I say 'well, you know me, I'm everyday on the phone talking and I wanna say and join the other group, you always can say, you don't accept them, the right side to complain about the left hand'. So that's what I have to say, she said 'O.K. thank you for your time, you can talk now you on the air'. [I say] 'I want to make you understand if you are in immigrant country, this is a registration for democratic people to say their opinion so you gotta give everyone a chance to talk'. She say 'O.K. how many minutes you want talk, talk as much you want'. I said 'it's not about how many minutes, I want to just give you this complaining, fix up your problem, and yourself, you fix it up, that's all, I don't want to talk. I just want to complain about you, and fix up your problem, you know'." SBS discussion group exchange

Participants in other discussion groups also reported changing their name to gain access to the airwaves. Some participants also did this to avoid being recognised by their friends and relatives who may be listening.

There was also a realisation among some study participants of the value of a good talkback radio producer:

"Most of their producers are young and don't stay around long enough, as good as someone of their producers, [some programs] have had so many producers, you train them a bit, and that's what Greg Cary said, someone offers them more money, well why don't you offer them more money... 4BC discussion group participant

In recognising the powerful role of the producer, some audiences felt it was important that producers had local knowledge. This was because such knowledge provided producers with a context for the role they played in providing access to the airwaves for callers and it could impact on the way issues were handled. For example:

Participant: “There’s been times where there’s quite clearly been a personality clash with the producers because the producers aren’t receptive to the local mood of things. In the way in which, you know if a producer has come up from Adelaide and is raw and doesn’t have an affinity with country behaviour and idiosyncrasies of country communities. They don’t necessarily connect with the information, with the, I guess the energy.”

Facilitator: “So are you saying though, that you sense there is hostility between, so towards you as a talkback caller from the producer?”

Participant: “It has happened because... particularly if you’ve got a subject that you’re passionate about. We’ve all been passionate about one thing or another. Mick has with refugee and community issues. I too, and I’ve phoned up with similar issues. We’ve spoken both on the same topic, sometimes they’re many and varied things and that’s the great thing about why we’re here is that you can integrate with anything and convey an issue. It doesn’t necessarily have to be just the one thing. You can come in and offer a different slant on things at any different time, but it has been in my experiences, some cases and it’s not something to whack somebody over the head about, where somebody just doesn’t get what’s going on. They [some producers] don’t have a feel for the way in which the community is actually responding to the radio.” ABC Renmark discussion group

These discussions revealed that participants who called talkback radio had a high level of knowledge of the mechanisms and processes used by producers in selecting talent for talkback. It also revealed that some individuals had developed techniques to subvert those processes and to get to air even when a producer may have other ideas about the contribution they could make to the on-air discussion.

## 10. The Value of Talkback Radio

Existing research has shown that talkback radio can 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 (Cook, 2000; Hilmes, 2002; Tebbutt, 2007). Some forms of talkback radio have the power to divide communities and these programs have caused and contributed to considerable social friction in the past, but other forms of talkback are providing antidotes to this problem. In exploring talkback that occurs both within and outside of populist formats this study has identified that regardless of format, talkback plays a number of important roles. Until now, Australian research into talkback radio has largely overlooked these roles, or when it has explored these issues it has done so in limited ways.

This study, which has examined talkback radio's role and value from the perspective of audiences, is the first of its kind to be undertaken in Australia. This study contributes to the existing body of research on talkback radio by filling some of the many gaps in the knowledge base about talkback radio's role and value to audiences. It goes some way towards challenging the stereotype that all talkback radio panders to populists and populism. It has shown that for many audience members talkback performs under valued and under recognised roles. These include but are by no means limited to the following:

Talkback radio variously:

1. Creates a sense of community for audiences and opportunities for social networking;
2. Provides company for people who may otherwise feel isolated;
3. Provides a form of therapy for some audience members through the provision of information and advice about issues, as well by providing access to the voices and experiences of other people;
4. Provides a source of hyper local news that is not provided by other media;
5. Gives news from home for people who are living away from their homeland/country of origin;
6. Is a point of access to the public sphere for audiences and provides the opportunity to engage in democratic process including accessing politicians directly;
7. Presents an opportunity for ordinary people to pass on news and information, to correct the public record and to contribute to the news agenda of the day;
8. Is a space for developing solutions to problems;
9. Is a place where community groups can lobby on issues;
10. Is a sources of news for other media;
11. Brings into existence spaces where a range of voices, opinions and ideas can be accessed including culturally diverse voices.

This study also examined the interactions between talkback radio producers and audiences and showed that while audiences view that role as very powerful many have developed insights into the operation of that role. It found that some audience

members have developed techniques for subverting what they see as the producers' control over who gets to air.

This study has importantly concluded that even in populist formats of talkback radio, audiences see the space as a homeland where they are safe to air their feelings and views on issues, which they may otherwise see that there is no other place to do so.

While this study has identified that there are many places outside populist formats of talkback where rational debate and discussion occurs and communities of like-minded or otherwise people are brought into existence, talkback radio and research in the field face a number of challenges.

One of these challenges, thrown up by this research, is to discover how talkback radio might be made more inclusive across ethnic and cultural divides. Finding ways that cross-pollination might occur across various talkback radio programs and among audiences is a challenge for the industry and for future research in this field. While some talkback programs such as 2MFM have begun the process of forming these connections, 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 that talkback radio programs address the issue of the range of voices represented in the discussions and conversations that occur in those spaces.

As all good talkback should do, this report ends with a comment from a participant in this study. This comment is just one of many that participants made in response to a question about what they would do without it. It highlights the importance of talkback to its audiences:

“It would be, I think it would not only be boring, it would also leave a horrible big hole I suppose, in our understanding of who we are to each other. As a community, there would be just this void I think, to lose that facility.” ABC Renmark discussion group participant

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<sup>ii</sup> Herald Sun, January 15, 2009, retrieved from FACTIVA database