

Creative Content and Sustainable Community Media Organisations: Australian Creative Resources Online

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Community media organisations have to routinely consider how to produce high quality programming in the face of limited resources. It is therefore a fact of life that the costs of producing high quality content can quickly become a debilitating burden on the budgets of community media organisations. In this context community broadcasters have limited capacity in terms of investing in and producing high quality programming. One result of this limitation is an adverse affect on audience perceptions of the desirability of community broadcasting. A result of limited audience size is restricted ability to attract sponsorship and advertising revenue streams. There is, in other words, a vicious cycle that community broadcasters find hard to escape.

When looking at overall costs across the production process (from preproduction, to production, to post production) of, for example, a television documentary, much of the cost of producing programming is found in the production stage. Thus, if high quality production materials were more easily accessed at low cost by community media organisations and grass-roots creative producers (who might produce content appropriate for community broadcasters) resources could be concentrated on downstream post production activities resulting in better programming. In this article we set out a model based on the Australian Creative Resources Online (ACRO) facility based at the University of Queensland's Ipswich campus (Australian Creative

Resources Online, 2004). This facility contains an archive of multi media resources that will be downloadable by end users working in digital post production environments. It is expected that the archive of resources will be available online in September 2004.

ACRO is being developed in the context of a new appreciation of the importance of grass-roots culture (Florida, 2002), the growing acceptance of the role of culture and creativity to knowledge-based economies (Rooney, Hearn, Mandeville, & Joseph, 2003; Rooney & Mandeville, 1998), emerging policy level concerns for broadband content development in Australia (Alston, 2003; Barron, 2001; Cutler, 2003; DCITA, 2003a, 2003b; Department of State Development, 2004; Jacka, 2001), and debates about how to make economies more innovative (Department of Culture, 2001; Howard, 2002; Howkins, 2001; NOIE, 2002; Reich, 1992). Creative workers and the media structures that support the distribution and display of their work are clearly important in this context. To date, however, discussion of community media within this larger policy, social and economic context has been limited. In this article we describe ACRO as a new aspect of grass-roots and community media that specifically links community broadcasting to the larger politico-economic environment.

ACRO's Philosophy

It is useful to begin by outlining ACRO's basic operating philosophy and its broad objectives. The ACRO archives and associated online tools are based on an "open resource" philosophy. The central organising logic of ACRO is that open access to high-quality content and content development tools will bring public and private benefits in the forms of increased cultural activity; increased levels of engagement in

cultural production; increased intercultural awareness; and increased economic activity related to cultural production, distribution, and exchange. The “open resource” value assumption is based on the fact that new media and broadband content environments are different from those of industrial era “mass” media environments. The main assumptions are: (1) the values of openness, novelty, and innovation are more likely to translate into economic value in new media than the values of predictability, highly regulated production, and closed IP regimes on which “mass” media models are based; (2) that unique cultural values will translate into many other forms of value, including economic value; and (3) that broadband infrastructure, while being some time from implementation in most developing regions, provides unprecedented opportunities to capitalise upon the unique character of all cultures to the benefit of their constituents in ways that are unattainable in “mass” media environments. The infrastructure will also lower barriers to entry in the cultural production sector thereby providing incentives for employment and new business creation through making low cost, broadcast quality resources widely available. Commercial cultural producers will no longer be geographically tied to the locations of major production houses most of which are located in metropolitan centres.

The Queensland Government’s *Creativity is Big Business* strategy (Department of State Development, 2004) in line with other Australian (e.g. Cutler, 2003) and international analyses (e.g. Jeffcutt, forthcoming) note that that the creative industries are having major economic impacts. Within this discourse it is easy to narrowly focus on the corporate or commercial end of the creative industries spectrum and neglect the grass-roots and community end. It is also easy to neglect research, education and

training, and cultural heritage imperatives. The ACRO facility not only directly meets several important creative industry and community needs but also will provide a platform for innovative research across many fields to define new internationally developed technical, operational, and multi media repositing systems; to understand the legal, technical, economic, professional, sociological, and cultural implications of new modes of creative production; to understand principles of design in an environment where design principles are changing very rapidly; to develop new multi media and broadband content software, middleware, and hardware; to design new intellectual property regimes; and to develop a self-sustaining, commercially viable network of grass-roots enterprises. The facility will also meet a need in providing a platform for research, education, and training in creative production skills for new media and broadband content environments. In respect of cultural heritage, the facility will meet an important need by helping to preserve and enhance cultural artefacts that might not otherwise be preserved. In short, by providing producers, broadcasters, students, teachers, researchers and the community with access to a range of production, research, and educational resources around an open resource repository, ACRO will stimulate long-term creative and cultural capital for creative industries.

A critical aspect of ACRO is that users not only draw resources down from the archive but that they also contribute their new productions (or parts of them, e.g. their off cuts) to the archive for further use. In other words, they can “recycle” this material into new broadband content, or commercial and non commercial digital media materials. We therefore argue that a unique aspect of the facility in respect of other digital archive projects is that it focuses (even if not exclusively) on capturing “unused” (unpublished or unbroadcast) audiovisual materials from production

processes to stimulate new production processes. By “unused”, we mean the excess materials typically left over in the production of broadcast materials. Many times more footage is typically shot than is used in “finished” products. High ratios of “unused” to “used” material are typical of industrial era, mass media production processes.

Intellectual Property

Recently, the importance of open source content (or open resources) to the Australian creative industries has been highlighted in a report by Terry Cutler to the Federal Government (Cutler, 2003). The idea of open resource, digital media repositories is new and the capacity to provide them is limited throughout the world. One reason for the limited presence of open source content facilities throughout the world is that Intellectual Property regimes are set up to seriously limit access and use (Drahos, 1999, forthcoming). While it is not in the original spirit of copyright law to limit creativity, and that the current limitations may be unintended outcomes of a long history of the interaction of law, technology and corporate practices, the negative consequences of copyright are seriously damaging to creativity (Lessig, 2004).

Copyright restrictions are one of the most pressing problems preventing growth in broadband content development internationally. The main problems lie in the extremes of traditional copyright law. Under established IP regimes, a creative work is either under copyright, with all rights reserved by a particular person or corporation, or it is public domain, which means that anyone can use it for any purpose.

Researchers at Stanford Law School’s Creative Commons have developed what they

describe as ‘a spectrum of rights’ that fall between the extremes of copyright and public domain (Creative Commons, 2003).

ACRO’s open resource stance is not one that attempts to work outside the Intellectual Property framework—that would, unfortunately, be impossible and would probably be a disincentive for established and emerging producers of creative content. ACRO seeks to create a legally safe framework for individuals and organisations to work with multi media resources in an open source environment. To do this ACRO will adopt an alternative copyright regime in the form of Creative Commons licences. The Creative Commons licenses are designed to accommodate both commercial and non-commercial uses of digital resources. They are based on the assumption that innovations and new ideas are extensions and elaborations of existing ones (Creative Commons, 2004; Lessig 2004). Contributors to ACRO’s archive will have the choice of selecting a licence within a spectrum of licences. The licences include (but are not limited to) the following:

- *By attribution*: a creator allows others to copy, distribute, display and perform copyrighted work (and derivative works based on it) but only if they give the author credit.
- *Noncommercial*: creators allow others to copy, distribute, display and perform their works (and derivative works based on it) but only for non commercial purposes.
- *No derivative works*: creators allow others to copy, distribute, display and perform only verbatim copies of their work and not derivatives based on it.
- *Share and share alike*: creators allow others to distribute derivative works only under a licence identical to the licence that governs the work.

Once a licence has been taken by a creator it will take three forms: (1) a Commons Deed, written in plain language; (2) Legal Code, written in formal legal language that will be usable in court; and (3) Digital Code, written in machine readable form to help with archiving, searching and identifying creators' works. Authors will identify their works with the creative commons "some rights reserved" symbol (rather than the standard copyright symbol). The licenses can be used in isolation or combination and offer an extremely flexible regime of copyright suited to broadband environments. The licenses have been written according to US and International law and are currently being adapted to Australian law under CC's iCommons project.

By providing a unique and diverse set of resources, and by encouraging derivative and open usage of those resources for the production of new creative works, ACRO will help lay the foundations for new digital rights management systems and alternative business practices suited to broadband environments.

Potential Applications of ACRO in Community Broadcasting

In directly addressing the problems of economically and culturally sustainable community broadcasting, we can say that ACRO is able to provide interesting, useful, quality digital audio and video materials that could be used in producing content for community media at relatively low cost. Furthermore, ACRO is also likely to increase the number of community level or grass-roots producers who can provide broadcasters with content by reducing barriers to becoming a producer at this level. These outcomes can be achieved without breaching copyright law and by showing greater respect to the intentions and needs of original creators (that are for the most

part ignored and extinguished by the traditional corporate mass media). In doing this it further frees the broadcaster and creator from many of the restrictions they currently endure. This can be done because what we call public efficiencies are produced. Part of the corporate logic that has driven Intellectual Property regimes into serious unintended consequences is the drive to achieve private returns and competitive advantage through privatising the products of creativity and restricting them. This is the internalisation of benefits to the corporation rather than audiences and individual (or non corporate) creators. The end result is that corporate owners (or appropriators) are actually in competition with the needs and desires of audiences and individual creators. Corporate media businesses see no other option than to internalise advantage.

Looked at from a community-wide perspective, this present scenario is one of massive inefficiency and unsustainability. As a consequence, growth in the production, distribution and display of creative content is stunted and will continue to be so without open resource initiatives. That is, a large amount of resources are put into the industry but many of them are either unused or are under-used because they cannot escape the lockup brought about by the drive to internalise. There are many potential uses and users who would like access to those resources but cannot have it.

Community broadcasters are one such group of users.

We can take a practical example of how public efficiencies can be increased to illustrate our point. A documentary maker shoots 300 hours of nature footage in North Queensland to make eight one-hour documentaries for television. At the end of the series, she has 292 hours of footage which will remain unused. Much of the offcut

footage will be of very high quality. Normally, this ‘waste’ material would go into a personal archive, perhaps to be discarded or forgotten about.¹ However, when the material is digitised and made accessible on broadband networks, it can, for example, be used by teachers and students in multi media courses, by budding documentary makers, by short film makers, by children learning how to make digital content in schools, or by diverse cultural groups such as those served by community broadcasting organisations, in fact, it will be a valuable resource for anybody wishing to study, understand, or capitalise upon the creative potential latent in the very roots of our cultural production industries.

We can extend this example and explore what could happen if the discarded remnants of the finished product (the documentary) were to be made available under a Creative Commons licence. The offcuts could be given away to students or those on unemployment benefits, then sold commercially to other professional creative workers if the maker wishes, under Creative Commons “some rights reserved” copyright philosophy. Under Creative Commons, even when some rights remain reserved, there is still a considerable public domain residual of benefit in the work. Before exploring what the public domain residual might be in this case, we look at the benefits to the maker. The maker is now less likely to have pressure from a large media company seeking to lock up the benefits of the makers work for themselves thereby excluding the maker from considerable benefits; the footage can be more readily sold because less onerous permissions (transaction costs) are incurred by potential new producers and broadcasters. Consequently what would normally be wasted can be sold at low cost without necessarily lowering the return to the maker

¹ We have encountered many examples of this in the development of ACRO and our hypothetical scenario is the norm rather than an extreme exception.

because her transaction costs are lower too and the amount of saleable resources she has is greater. Furthermore, if the offcuts can be distributed free of cost to non-commercial parties, the maker will enjoy a wider distribution than is possible if it were locked away under conventional copyright. This would result in the reputation and profile of the maker being enhanced, widening the market for her existing and future works. The maker will also be making an active contribution to the community of documentary and film-makers globally, and will be in a better position to be provided with assistance from other members of that community in pursuing her future work.

A community broadcaster wanting to show works produced under this alternative systems will clearly benefit too. Lower costs, more choice and better quality of broadcast content are obvious benefits. However, because the community-based, grass-roots production community will have more resources available to them, and will be able to operate in a more comfortable and open legal environment, and because creative workers in the community will get valuable experience, increase their skills and be better able to tell the stories of their communities, community broadcasters will be able to draw on a wider range of producers and a deeper pool of quality content.

Moreover, in light of persistent concerns about too much of Australian broadcast content being generated outside Australia it is essential to promote local content that reflects Australians' values, identities, and cultural characteristics. One under valued channel for doing this is community broadcasting. However, the convergence of

community broadcasting and broadband content environments through ACRO puts community broadcasters in a better position to do this.

Research and Development

Increasing the capacity for broadband creative production will not only rely on current knowledge, technologies, business models and skills, it will also rely on having access to focused research and development (R&D) programs. It should be emphasised that the ACRO facility accomplishes some unique objectives in this regard by its existence and function. As research infrastructure, it provides a unique test bed for the array of research concerned with the development of broadband content and digital media more generally.

ACRO supports research that is multidisciplinary in nature and which requires a mix of science and technology, and social science and humanities research. Research projects are currently being developed or conducted around the ACRO facility in the following areas: interaction design; education; management; intellectual property law; journalism; communication; media studies; engineering; middleware applications design; development communication; sociology; community engagement studies; intellectual property, creative industries; education; and new media theory. The national and international, and multidisciplinary research program surrounding ACRO therefore aligns with the requirements of an emerging grass-roots and community broadcasting industry in need of developmental investment.

Increasingly affordable and accessible digital technologies for post production work mean that community broadcasters will come to rely more and more on production

work done in broadband environments. Grass-roots producers working in non- and semi-commercial contexts hold the potential to provide considerable amounts of local content for community broadcasters. As a consequence of this and because many of the objectives of community broadcasting are oriented towards contributing to such things as creating new social, creative and cultural capital, there is a growing need to mount significant research across the spectrum of research areas we have identified. Community broadcasters and the grass-roots producers have limited resources with which to conduct such research. There is a very strong argument here for publicly funded research that combines universities, broadband producers, broadband providers, and broadcasters to be conducted. ACRO is in very large part a response to this growing need.

ACRO was originally conceived as a facility around which well-developed local, national, and international links would be developed, and as a conduit for connecting urban, regional, interstate and international communities and businesses through research collaborations across practically every part of the contemporary community media and broadband content landscape. Internationally, ACRO has developed links with international collaborators including researchers from the University of Waterloo (Canada), the Singapore National Institute of Education, Creative Commons, the European Consortium for Communications Research, the University of Essen (Germany), Michigan State University's MATRIX program; H-Net, the world's largest e-humanities research network; and Virginia Tech, to name just a few.

Access

Access is an important issue and is addressed in a number of ways by ACRO. For community broadcasters' access to content, production resources, production technologies, R&D, relevant social, production and distribution networks, management resources, and so on are all important and are all part of the cluster of concerns ACRO seeks to address. So too are the access needs of the independent grass-roots producers who can provide important content for broadcasters. Because of the potential for a symbiotic relationship between the producers and broadcasters, the access needs of both must be addressed simultaneously.

For producers, their ability to access the archive to place resources in it is governed primarily by their willingness to place their materials in under creative commons licence arrangements. Limits exist for the extent to which non digital materials can be entered. ACRO has the capacity to digitise some analogue materials, depending on their formats. There are also limits to the advisability of sending hard copy analogue formatted materials to ACRO or other places for digitisation. For example, old materials may not be durable enough to withstand the rigours of transportation; the cost of digitising old movie footage is currently prohibitive; many formats have become redundant; and so on. "Born digital" resources should be less problematic to place in the archive. These materials will be able to be uploaded to the archive digitally through the internet (particularly for those with broadband access). It will also be possible to send them to ACRO for uploading on CD and DVD discs.

Similarly, access to downloading resources to be reused will primarily be through the internet. Broadband internet access is an advantage here but dial up access will be feasible. Those without internet access will be able to order materials on CD and DVD discs.

Broadcasters, by virtue of the increased access to production resources by producers, will have more access to broadband content. This will only be enhanced by the increasingly digital broadcast platforms in use in many broadcast organisations today. Moreover, given that broadcasters often edit or otherwise postproduce content before broadcasting, they can only benefit from having their own access to a resource like those in ACRO.

ACRO itself has access issues that need addressing. The principal concern here is the extent to which ACRO has access to a diverse range of cultural, socioeconomic and production discipline-based producers. In the long term, an archive such as ACRO needs to be distributed. That is, ACRO needs to exist as a distributed network form so that it is close to a wide range producers and meets their needs in terms of search capacity, speed of delivery, and flexible compatibility of formats. To meet these aims, nodes of ACRO need to be created around Australia and the world. A Canadian version of ACRO is already under construction at the University of Waterloo and it is hoped that more will be made in Australia and internationally. In other words, ACRO aims to become a network of digitisation and distribution suites that will provide a rich source of multi media material in an accessible archive for community groups.

ACRO is also concerned to make its resources accessible to students at all levels of the education system. Education and training in multi media authoring techniques are keys to the long-term future of the culture and creative industries. Therefore providing students with good materials to work with in post production training, and for developing high levels of multi media literacy is imperative for the future. Students at

schools, TAFE's and universities would in turn place their finished projects in the form of short documentaries, photographic portfolios, computer art and so on in the archive for distribution. It is also important from an educational point of view to reiterate that the resources students can download from ACRO will have the advantage of being covered by the Creative Commons licences, creating a legally safe environment for them to work within. Educational institutions are all too aware of the aggression with which major media companies (particularly in the music and, more recently, video industries) are pursuing students for copyright breaches. Having assisted students to develop skills in broadband production, there are significant long-term benefits for industry in accessing a larger pool of skilled production workers. As the Queensland Government's *Creativity is Big Business* (Department of State Development, 2004) acknowledges, education and skill development is "a cross-cutting initiative that will benefit all subsectors of the creative industries."

Access to new media authoring (and literacy) skills needs to keep pace with access to the production technologies and digital media resources. Just as Microsoft Powerpoint™—once confined to the domains of business, teaching, and marketing professionals—has now become standard fare for students in primary school, it is merely a matter of time before other multi media authoring programs become an everyday part of the classroom environment. Versions of many professional quality programs, such as Avid's DV Express and Digidesign's Protools, which formerly cost thousands of dollars, are now available for free through the internet. By providing resources that can be easily accessed and edited using these programs, the facility will provide a research environment in which research into the development of authoring skills using powerful applications can be developed. The results will be access to

better knowledge about the best ways students can be taught to engage in cultural production and the creative industries whilst actively participating in the production of new cultural products with a local flavour and a global audience.

Given the importance of regional and remote broadcasting and telecommunications issues in Australia, it is important to acknowledge the importance of both community broadcasting and broadband content development in that context. While each of the imperatives discussed above hold significant weight in a metropolitan context, they hold special weight for regional and remote communities that are not always well served in terms of telecommunications infrastructure. The “digital divide” is still alive and well in regional Australia, and the barriers to production are prohibitive there.

Considerable stimulus can be provided to the regional and remote broadcast and grass-roots production communities through the provision of accessible and low cost production resources, and by extending access to affordable and efficient next-generation broadband infrastructure. Unfortunately, in many parts of regional and remote Australia this basic infrastructure is not yet available thus denying access to ACRO’s resources for those people and limiting broadband driven economic, social and cultural development in those places.

Conclusions

Community broadcasting, digital media and broadband content development can come together in productive and useful ways to make community broadcasting more sustainable. They can be facilitated in doing this by the provision of high quality, low cost, easily accessible open resources. In this article we have outlined what we think are some important considerations for community broadcasters in light of policy

imperatives for creative industries, broadband content and, technology development. Community media outlets can only strengthen their claims for a place in the main stream of policy and industry discourse if it is understood that they have the potential for adding considerably to national technology, broadband, creative industries and knowledge-based economy objectives. ACRO is uniquely situated to assist in this process, underwritten by its philosophy of open resources, and its commitment to and capacity to provide alternative copyright regimes through its Creative Commons licences. ACRO also recognises that considerable amounts of R&D needs to be done across a number of areas of technological R&D, business, economics and law, education, media studies and so on to make the facility viable for producers throughout the creative industries.

From a sustainability point of view, a distinct advantage of providing access to ACRO's materials is that it significantly lowers barriers to entry for new and emerging producers of new media and broadband content. Access to these materials would also be valuable to established film, television, and radio producers; musicians; advertisers; documentary producers, etc. All of these people are potential content providers for community media organisations. Such material is often of very high quality and can therefore be of great value to many people and groups in the community if stored and made available through community broadband portals. Therefore, at a fundamental level of concern to ACRO is access. Access is a major issue in the future of community media production. Access is relevant on a number of different dimensions. Access to resources, access to networks, access to research, access to training, access to technology, and access to the internet are all issues that are addressed to various degrees by ACRO.

An archive like ACRO can greatly accelerate the production cycle and drastically change the cost structures of grass-roots and community multi media production. ACRO, therefore, is unique in its focus on digitising to provide low-cost, 'secondary' broadcast-quality production resources specifically for use in creative industries production, an important and high-growth sector of the Australian economy and world wide. Finally, ACRO is seeking to expand its network of researchers, practitioners, managers and policy professionals in pursuit of its goals and would welcome approaches from other universities, businesses and individuals with good ideas to help meet its goals of conducting relevant research and assisting practitioners.

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