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## Globalization and the public sphere

Exploring the space of community media in Sydney

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### ABSTRACT

Recent accounts of Habermas's conception of the public sphere concern the interlocking of multiple networks and spaces. In a global context new interfaces between existing (counter-) public spheres can lead to multiple counter-publics. This article explores this phenomenon through the examination of the communicative spaces that offer alternatives to Australia's mainstream public sphere from three different strands of Sydney's community media: diasporic media (Assyrian Radio SBS), Indigenous media (Koori Radio) and discursive sites that operate in between ethnic and mainstream media (Forum for Australia's Islamic Relations).

### KEY WORDS

Assyrian diaspora ■ Australia ■ community media ■ counter-public sphere ■ Indigenous public sphere ■ Koori Radio ■ public sphere ■ Sydney

globalization . . . has the potential of creating its own public sphere, outside and, potentially, against the domain of the nation-state. (Price, 1995: 337)

it is necessary . . . to return to a 'realistic' vision of the universes in which the universal is generated. (Bourdieu, 2000: 127)

### Introduction

What does globalization do to the public sphere as ideal and practice? One answer might look to global networks for the construction of a new deliberative space to rival the implicitly national public sphere on which Habermas's ideal was originally<sup>1</sup> based: this is the route suggested by Monroe Price in our first quotation. The materialism of Pierre Bourdieu, however, suggests something quite different: that the accelerating but uneven flows in global information-space enable a manifold of public spheres, counter-public spheres and alternative discursive sites, each with

varying relations to particular local and global forces. A global city<sup>2</sup> such as Sydney, Australia, is a good place to examine the diversity that is masked by the general terms 'public sphere' and counter-public sphere in an era of globalization.

Habermas's original ideal/historical model (Habermas, 1989) has been much criticized for the inaccuracy of its historical detail and the excessive rationalism of its ideal of public deliberation. The most fundamental attack however – from feminist political theorists – brings together historical and ideal dimensions by arguing both that Habermas's original account ignores the specific exclusions (of women and non-whites) from supposed historical public spheres and that by doing so it misleads us into thinking that a single public sphere is possible and desirable (Fraser, 1992; cf. Negt and Kluge, 1993[1972] on the working class 'counter-public sphere').

To what extent does a single public sphere remain useful as an ideal towards which to work in public discourse? Various recent accounts including Habermas's own later model (Baker, 2003; Curran 1996; Dahlgren, 1995; Habermas, 1996) depict the public sphere not as one site, but as the interlocking of multiple networks and spaces; even so, it is uncertain how much remains at stake in the possibility of a common discursive space through which different publics might speak to each other. As globalization enables new interfaces between existing (counter-) public spheres, we can expect multiple counter-publics distinguished by 'various degrees of exclusion from prominent channels of discourse and a corresponding lack of practical power' (Asen and Brouwer, 2001: 2–3). This raises the question of the 'quality of relation between [those] publics' and indeed 'what is "counter" about counterpublics?' (2001: 8).

To address these large questions we have chosen three communicative spaces that offer alternatives to Australia's mainstream public sphere from three different strands of Sydney's community media: diasporic media, Indigenous media and discursive sites that operate in between ethnic and mainstream media. Through these examples, we aim to better understand the 'space of possibles' constituted by this global city's community media,<sup>3</sup> challenging the assumption that the public sphere model requires either a unified public sphere or a set of independent 'counter-public' sphericules (Gitlin, 1998) unconnected by any common discourse. The possibilities are more diverse and more interesting.<sup>4</sup>

Our discussion draws on the long-term research of Tanja Dreher into Sydney's community media, and interviews conducted with each of our example organizations in early 2004 by Nick Couldry.<sup>5</sup>

### Other public spheres

No contemporary account of the public sphere in a global context can neglect the three forms that cut across the closed national circle of Habermas's original model: the counter-public sphere, the Indigenous public sphere, and the diasporic public sphere.

#### Counter-public sphere(s)

At root the 'public sphere' is a democratic vision of public space, seeing it 'as the creation of procedures whereby those affected by general social norms and collective political decisions can have a say in their formulation, stipulation and adoption' (Benhabib, 1992: 87). But for societies riven by fundamental conflicts of interest this abstract vision bears little relation to actual so-called 'public spheres'. The 19th and 20th-century working class, Negt and Kluge (1993: 35–36) argue, developed a 'counter-public sphere' that was incapable of genuinely coexisting with the 'bourgeois' public sphere. Nancy Fraser (1992: 109–10), without denying the valuable core to Habermas's public sphere ideal, insists that we cannot simply assume that a single, level, unitary public sphere is a real possibility at any historical moment. Nor can we insist that particular social actors *should* necessarily work towards joining a unitary public sphere. This does not mean no common terms are at stake in the struggle between a counter-public sphere and an existing mainstream public sphere: one thing at stake is the boundary between public and private (Fraser, 1992: 129), from which perspective the idea of the public sphere may remain an important reference-point (cf. Garnham, 1992).

How might globalization inflect the concept of the 'counter-public' sphere? Global cities are places not only where new forms of citizenship are enacted (Sassen, 2002a) but also where new forms of public sphere can be, or indeed must be, developed and negotiated. In Sassen's account, the global city is a key site for the development of new forms of politics and power at both the subnational and the supra-national level: 'the weakening of the exclusive formal authority of states over national territory facilitates the ascendancy of sub- and transnational spaces and actors in politico-civic processes' (2002b: 217). Importantly, global cities are sites for the localization of globalization, opening up possibilities for 'place-specific politics with a global span' (2002b: 219). These dynamics are evident in our examples, in which community media address audiences (both local and global publics) not defined through the Australian nation-state – a development greatly facilitated by the

diversity of peoples and media flows, and the intense concentration of resources in a global city such as Sydney. As a regional media production centre (Sinclair et al., 1995) and an intersection of global media flows, Sydney has multiple (counter-) public spheres, operating on multiple scales: the question is to understand how they coexist.

Our cases illustrate just three of the many possibilities for such spaces. These may, but need not, fit easily into the concept of public spheres explicitly 'counter' to the mainstream. While the Indigenous public sphere we consider (Koori Radio) definitely 'counters' certain exclusions of the Australian mainstream media and has no prospect of integrating with it, the diasporic media we consider (Assyrian Radio SBS) does not 'counter' Australia's mainstream but offers a transnational supplement for a specific population. Meanwhile Forum for Australia's Islamic Relations (FAIR) is not a counter-public sphere, but rather a space of information, deliberation and activism that seeks to reform the mainstream public sphere, but from a position at present outside it. That only one of such cases fits easily into the notion of the 'counter'-public sphere does not make their strategies any less interesting.

### **Indigenous public spheres**

While political theorists have debated the constitution of counter-public spheres, in Australian media studies researchers have applied the concept of the public sphere to practices of media consumption and production among communities marginalized along the lines of race and ethnicity. Indigenous media are the fastest growing sectors in Australian media, having developed as a result of 'discontent with mainstream media misrepresentation of Indigenous affairs and the desire to appropriate communication technologies as a first level service for communities' (Meadows and Molnar, 2002: 19). That is, Indigenous media production in Australia can be seen as both a response to the representations in the 'mainstream' public sphere and as an assertion of self-determination. For John Hartley and Alan McKee (2000), the 'Indigenous public sphere' encompasses both mainstream and Indigenous media production and entails competing claims to knowledge and authority which not only shape policy but also produce Indigenous and non-Indigenous identities. Like feminist or diasporic public spheres, the Indigenous public sphere 'precedes any "nation" that a public sphere normally "expresses", as it were; it is the "civil society" of a nation without borders, without state institutions, and without citizens' (Hartley and McKee, 2000: 3).

Research into Indigenous media in Australia poses two interrelated questions which will be relevant to our discussion of the Indigenous public sphere: the question of sovereignty and the question of influencing or 'indigenizing' the mainstream. John Hartley asks, 'who has sovereignty in the Aboriginal public sphere?' and argues that the public sphere of Indigenous media organizations is under Indigenous control, whereas the Indigenous public sphere in the mainstream media is not (1997: 43–4). Meadows and Molnar emphasize a deeper level of self-determination, arguing that the greatest challenge facing Indigenous media is 'to break away from the confining non-Indigenous frameworks within which the media sector has emerged, and to adopt an Indigenous way of doing things' (2002: 19). Furthermore, as the Indigenous public sphere exists both within and alongside mainstream media, and Indigenous media have developed at least in part as a response to the exclusions and misrepresentations of the national public sphere, the ability to influence those wider representations is of crucial concern. Thus Indigenous media sovereignty might consist of control over media production, the development of innovative modes of representation and the ability to impact on the decolonization of the wider public sphere. Dot West encapsulated these possibilities in a nationally broadcast lecture on Indigenous media:

We're here now  
 With our own sound waves,  
 To tell of how  
 We became your slaves.  
 The stories are rich  
 And cultures strong,  
 We will teach  
 Of the right and the wrong.  
 So watch your voice  
 Young white one,  
 We now have a choice  
 To correct your tongue. (West, 1993: 13)

### Transnational diasporic spheres

The increasing flows of people and media across national borders means that 'living with difference' has become a key challenge for multicultural societies in a globalizing world (Hall, 2001). Contemporary diasporas have been described as 'the exemplary communities of the transnational moment' (Toloyan cited in Werbner, 1998: 11) and as such have become the focus for considerable research on media and globalization. Indeed,

the formation of diaspora communities is enabled by global media just as extensive media networks have been developed by various transnational groups.

Diaspora media spaces enable the negotiation of culture and politics in both 'home' and 'host' countries, creating transnational communities and imaginings. These allow for collective conversations both within and beyond nation-states and the formation of hybrid identities. In Pnina Werbner's study of 'the diasporic public sphere' of British Pakistani Muslims, these conversations 'rest on shared moral imperatives of responsibility for the Other, and in particular, a sense of responsibility for the scattered communities of diaspora' (1998: 25) while Cunningham and Sinclair argue that the necessity of negotiating between 'home' and 'host' produces a cosmopolitan worldview (2000: 33). If the experience of diaspora requires one to negotiate differences, Cunningham and Nguyen (2000) suggest a range of cultural positions that are produced or staged within this negotiation: a conservative position focused on 'pure' heritage maintenance and ideological monitoring; a mainstream cultural negotiation; and assertive hybridity. Research on diasporic media also stresses the affective dimensions of public communication and suggests that these media are characterized by a blurring of the distinction between entertainment and information (e.g. Naficy, 1993). Studies of particular diasporic public spheres reveal the importance of storytelling and music for developing affirmative or emancipatory forms of community-consciousness (Gow, 2004b; Werbner, 1998).

If diasporic media can be seen as a public sphere (Werbner, 1998) or 'loci of affirmation' (Gow, 2004a) for the negotiation of transnational identities and imaginaries, what of the interaction or 'quality of relations' between multiple public spheres which is the focus of our article? Werbner argues that the diasporic public sphere is a 'space of freedom' in which global ethical issues can be debated precisely because it 'does *not* have a direct impact on world affairs' (1998: 17, emphasis added). In addition, Werbner notes that 'the production and reappropriation of meaning are at the core of contemporary social conflicts' (1998: 20) and adopts Benhabib's (1992: 94) argument that 'the struggle over what gets included in the public sphere is itself a struggle for justice and freedom'.

Although he does not specifically address the dynamics of diaspora, Charles Husband has developed a normative framework for analysing media and the public sphere in multi-ethnic societies (2000). Rather than focusing on the media of specific 'communities', Husband

addresses the broader challenge of 'living with difference' through his advocacy of media 'facilitating an inter-ethnic multi-interest exchange' (2000: 213) and a 'Right to be Understood' which 'would place upon all a duty to seek comprehension of the other' (2000: 208). Crucially, Husband argues that media for minorities are necessary but insufficient for multicultural societies, which require additional 'exchange of information and cultural products *across* these communities of identity' (2000: 209). Whereas research on diasporic media has largely neglected the question of relations between public spheres, Husband's framework places the possibilities for dialogue, negotiation and mutual understanding between communities such as mainstream and diaspora at the very centre of the analysis (cf. Downing and Husband, 2002).

### **Versions of the public sphere**

#### **The context of Sydney's community media**

The largest publicly funded media outlets in Australia are the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) and the Community Broadcasting sector. All broadcast both radio and television programming and all have production centres in Sydney. The ABC is modelled on the BBC and 'draws its charter from the idea of the nation' (Miller, 1997: 58). The SBS, on the other hand, represents a unique broadcasting model, 'established with the specific purpose of providing an avenue for government to counter the myth of monoculturalism and promote Australia as a multicultural society' (Jakubowicz and Newell, 1995: 131). SBS Radio presents itself as 'the world's most linguistically diverse broadcaster', while SBS TV provides a 'multicultural' service including programming in 40 or more original languages, subtitled in English. From its inception in 1975, SBS Radio targeted migrants arriving in Australia, providing information on settlement services in languages other than English and assisting processes of language and cultural maintenance for Australians of 'non-English speaking backgrounds'. The Assyrian radio programme analysed below is one example.

Whereas the SBS has largely adopted the conventions of professional journalism and media production, the Community Broadcasting sector emphasizes access and participation, based on the principle that the airwaves are a public resource (Molnar, 1997: 218). Community broadcasting relies on volunteer labour, and community radio stations typically provide some level of training and access to production facilities and air time for audience or 'community' members interested

in media production. Community radio has been described as 'the most diverse broadcasting sector in Australia' (Molnar, 1997: 218). Koori Radio was awarded a permanent Community Radio licence in 2001, after nearly two decades of development and test transmissions.

Within the commercially funded media sector there are also significant 'community' media outlets produced and distributed in Sydney, although these have attracted very little research attention. The Forum on Australia's Islamic Relations (FAIR) produces narrowcast radio (accessed via designated receivers), a newspaper and a website.

The relative lack of research on community media in Australia is particularly apparent in the lack of reliable audience figures for media outlets beyond the mass audience, English-language media. Ratings figures for community radio are rarely collected, although recent research suggests that audiences for community radio are larger than has conventionally been estimated (Knight, 2004). Despite the lack of ratings data, it is possible to analyse the public that is interpellated by different community media strategies. In this article we highlight the diverse concepts of the 'public' that underpin our three examples of public spheres outside the mainstream.

### **Assyrian SBS Radio**

Assyrian SBS Radio broadcasts one hour a week on the Australian SBS network, although web radio has now allowed its programme to reach the Assyrian diaspora globally. The programme is small (2 staff operating from a single office), and concentrates on news and current affairs: since the start of the Iraq war in 2003, there has of course been a great deal of difficult news coming from Iraq where many Assyrians live.

The Assyrian diaspora is dispersed widely across the Middle East (not just Iraq but Iran, Turkey, Syria and Lebanon) and in the USA, UK, Russia and elsewhere. As Wilson Younan, the radio station's managing director, explained (Younan, 2004),<sup>6</sup> in Australia there are approximately 18,000 Assyrians according to the latest census on which Assyrian SBS's broadcasting entitlement is based. Independent surveys of the largest language groups show that for the majority, SBS Radio is their main source of news and information, and their primary source of information about government and community services. Similarly, Younan estimates that more than half of the Assyrian population in Australia listens to the programme,<sup>7</sup> and ethnographic research among Assyrian Australians attests to the importance of this service in their daily lives, especially at a time of global conflict (Gow, 2004b). Most Assyrians in

Australia have arrived as refugees since 1992 and the first Gulf War (Gow, 2004b: 12).

The SBS's subsidy is closely monitored for the Assyrian Australian community's response and the overall demographics and language skills of that community. Whatever the constraints, this still represents an improvement on the situation in the Middle East where there is no daily press in Assyrian. The Assyrian programme on SBS Radio is typical of transnational media serving a 'geolinguistic region' and operating out of Sydney, a global media centre (Cunningham and Sinclair, 2000: 2–3).

Reliance on indications of community support encourages Assyrian SBS to work to overcome differences between local Assyrian communities. Younan sees himself as having played an important role in resolving conflict between two versions of Assyrian Christianity and constructing a single community: 'I've started to bring both communities together through SBS'. This community-focused role is intertwined with an allegiance to the Australian state:

I do remind people that we are living in one of the best countries in the world. You can practise anything that you want. You have a lot of privilege, but you have responsibility also, to contribute to this country. (Younan, 2004)

Younan sees his news responsibilities in terms consistent with this, informing the Australian Assyrian community of events beyond it through an almost complete reliance on official sources both in Australia and abroad. This understanding is consistent with a form of state multiculturalism which emphasizes homeland politics, migrant settlement and cultural maintenance:

through my programme, I try to get the [Australian] Assyrian people to think twice, that they are in a new country, and they have to do some changes to their way of life, they need to start to realize that they're not still in Iraq . . . in a nutshell . . . I try to help them to assimilate to society. (Younan, 2004)

Younan's reference to 'assimilation' is significant precisely because the 'multicultural' policies of the SBS were intended to replace earlier policies of 'assimilation'. In contrast, Younan's comments suggest a one-way practice of adaptation. This supports recent critiques that a multiculturalism based on 'heritage' and ties to the homeland need not necessarily challenge existing political practices or the hegemonic position of the dominant cultural formation (Hage, 1998). There was little trace in our interview of the discourses of hybrid identities or intergenerational difference that have interested many researchers of

diasporic media (Barker, 1999; Gillespie, 1995; Sinclair and Cunningham, 2000) nor of a desire to develop an independent Assyrian voice vis-a-vis the Australian mainstream, even at a time of global conflict directly involving both the Australian federal government and the Assyrian diaspora.

On another level, however, things become more complex. The Assyrian programme's policy on language aims to offer a 'pure' Assyrian, free of Arabic or other importations found across the Assyrian diaspora. Here we find evidence of a process of 'affirmation' which is particularly significant for anti-colonial stateless groups (Gow, 2004a). In fact, for its own globally dispersed 'nation', Assyrian SBS seeks to perform something analogous to state media's role as national language guardian in the early 20th century, setting linguistic standards that must be applied wherever Assyrians find themselves:

sometimes when you use those difficult [Assyrian] words . . . they [the audience] will think twice – 'What's this?' But I have to do it, because . . . a lot of people, they learn, they improve their Assyrian through my programme, you know? . . . Even overseas people send emails to SBS management thanking them about the standards of the programme, not only journalistically . . . but also language-wise. (Younan, 2004)

This is just one aspect of the 'representative' role Assyrian SBS sees itself as playing on a global scale; the more obvious aspect is news-gathering.

During the US/UK/Australian invasion of Iraq in 2003, SBS allocated the Assyrian programme an extra hour's programme, timed to coincide with midday in Iraq:

SBS was the only programme, the only window to get into Iraq and get the news and live interviews and up-to-date . . . The whole world used to wait till Tuesday and Friday again . . . to know what's happening about their brothers and sisters, the community there. (Younan, 2004)

Younan sees this representative role as both guaranteeing him access to major news sources in Iraq and requiring him to treat the various Assyrian 'tribes' in Iraq with balance, once again worked through at the level of language:

they are from different tribes and they have different dialects, too, and the way that I present my programme is, you know, it's accepted that the dialogue, the way that I speak, it is accepted to every single community [in Iraq]. (Younan, 2004)

The principles of state multiculturalism are, then, reflected across the whole of Assyrian SBS's practice and implicitly legitimated because of

the service's global networking power (subsidized by SBS in the form of a satellite phone link).

This global role is superimposed on a more straightforward role as a hub within Sydney's local Assyrian networks, with part of each week's programme devoted to local announcements. Local participation in the service is, however, limited to a monthly phone-in or 'talkback' section; indeed the limited resources and remit provided by SBS make experiments beyond the 'top-down' news bulletin/documentary difficult.

In terms of a public sphere Assyrian SBS's contribution is important, if constrained. SBS Assyrian Radio addresses a transnational community of language, linking diaspora publics across the globe. This interpellates a transnational public which can debate and deliberate on politics and possibilities beyond the parameters of any one nation state. The importance of this programme is indicated by the number of its correspondents around the globe, the participation of high level interviewees and the popularity of talkback – receiving calls from New Zealand, the United States and beyond. During the 2003 invasion of Iraq, 'SBS Assyrian Radio was the only media outlet in Australia to inform people of specific Assyrian deaths during the war' (Gow, 2004b: 10).

Assyrian SBS operates within a global space of parallel diasporic media, cutting across local and national scales, while reproducing at all scales a version of the traditional 'integrated' multicultural public sphere. The programme's transnational orientation helps construct the virtual Assyrian diaspora within Australia and beyond. But there is no scope from this base for challenging issues of racism, inequality and cultural marginalization (cf. Werbner, 1998: 18) at the level of the mainstream public sphere. However, its web-distribution resources, as well as the political and geographical complexity of its reference-community, distinguish Assyrian SBS from older versions of that traditional model.

### **Koori Radio**

The very name *Koori Radio* and its call sign, 'Two Live 'n' Deadly', suggest a determination to assert both sovereignty and culture predating colonization as well as the contemporary realities of urban Indigenous communities. 'Koori' is a South East Aboriginal term which is widely used in preference to the English term 'Aboriginal', while 'deadly' is a common colloquialism in Aboriginal English, meaning 'excellent' or 'fantastic'. Both are examples of self-representation and self-definition in a context in which Indigenous Australians have historically been

defined, described and even catalogued by the institutions of colonization, including media (Langton, 1993). These words signal the central role of Koori Radio as described by General Manager, Brad Cooke:

Simply to give Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people an unedited voice, a voice where they can tell their story, tell their history, expand on their culture, show talent, accentuate positives as opposed to answering negatives. (Cooke, 2004)

Typical of the Indigenous public sphere, Koori Radio is both an expression of self-determination and a response to representations in the 'mainstream' public sphere.

Operating within the public access community radio sector, Koori Radio has limited but relatively stable resources, and reaches an estimated audience of 40,000 listeners across Sydney. Koori Radio is also a part of a national network of Indigenous radio stations and the National Indigenous Radio Service (NIRS). Throughout our interview Cooke expressed a clear commitment to the principle of participation, both through talkback and accessing community voices on-air, and through volunteer access to broadcasting opportunities.

Unlike SBS Radio, Koori Radio is a larger-scale community radio station that has the scope to address its listeners as potential media producers or participants. The mode of address focuses on a concept of an Indigenous audience which is nevertheless highly diverse. Announcers regularly refer to 'our mob', 'our communities' and 'our music'. Something of the socio-economic conditions of the implied audience can also be gleaned from the numerous call-outs to listeners in prison<sup>8</sup> and Brad Cooke's comment that the station returns the calls of mobile phone users to reduce their costs. Nevertheless the programming showcases Indigenous success in the professions, culture and sports, and talk programme announcers address the audience as a public interested in debating issues and being informed. Programming is dominated by music, with hourly news bulletins and a substantial talk line-up. Week-day mornings feature a Breakfast programme of music, news and interviews (7–9am) and the Blackchat news and current affairs programme (9am–noon). Koori Grapevine is a one-hour talk programme on weekday afternoons featuring news, interviews and talkback addressed at young listeners.

As is typical of the Australian community radio sector, the station is heavily reliant on volunteers, with 50 to 100 people and 20 on-air presenters making unpaid contributions each week. There are regular call-outs for listeners to become involved as volunteers or to participate

in specific activities, for example a project recording Elders' oral histories. Koori Radio aims to be 'more than a radio station', operating as an information and community service addressing the entire audience of Indigenous people in Sydney, as well as non-Indigenous Australians, Pacific Islanders and Indigenous communities from beyond Australia. Programming incorporates strategies for community involvement rather than simple representation: 'we throw the lines open to the community each session without fail' (Cooke, 2004).

The interest in participation and community service extends to Koori Radio's involvement in organizing public events which showcase Indigenous arts and culture, and music in particular. The commitment to community service and to showcasing both traditional and contemporary Indigenous cultural expression operates within an overall discourse of keeping to the 'positives' (such as 'education') and not being 'political'. Cooke's emphasis on positive images is clearly a response to the preponderance of 'negatives' in the mainstream public sphere – 'we want people to know about the great things Aboriginal people are doing' (2004). Cooke rejects official discourses of reconciliation or assimilation and warns against the dangers of tokenism. This suggests a continuation of the politics of self-determination and sovereignty which dominated Indigenous politics during the 1970s and 1980s rather than the state policy of reconciliation unanimously adopted by the federal parliament in 1991. At Koori Radio self-determination is inflected with an emphasis on cultural politics rather than earlier concerns such as land rights and a treaty.

In terms of news and current affairs programming, Brad Cooke is committed to public sphere norms and conventional journalism values, described as covering 'issues', rather than 'names', 'staying professional' and ensuring 'balance' on even the most controversial community issues. While rioting by the Redfern Aboriginal community dominated mainstream news reporting in February 2004, at Koori Radio,

we made sure that when we covered this situation we gave people the opportunity to say their side of the story and then we got the police on to tell their side of the story . . . we gave everybody the opportunity to speak. (Cooke, 2004)

Programming moves well beyond a narrow news and current affairs service, covering 'the stories that aren't being done by the mainstream media'. This includes 'know your rights' education and issues such as employment, health and lifestyle, politics and history, and consumer rights.

If Cooke is confident in Koori Radio's ability to ensure participation and representation for Indigenous people 'on their own terms' (Meadows and Molnar, 2002) within an Indigenous public sphere, there is less evidence of an ability to influence or to 'indigenize' (Hartley and McKee, 2000) the mainstream public sphere. Cooke described Koori Radio's role in educating non-Indigenous audiences as very important:

now we've finally got a voice, the reason it's such a big deal is because we've just been absolutely hammered in mainstream media. And that's what we're now avoiding because people can say, 'Well, if you've got a problem with all that, and you want to hear the real story, tune into Koori Radio'. (Cooke, 2004)

Yet this strategy of self-representation has had relatively little discernible impact upon the mainstream news media which remain, for most non-Indigenous Australians, the primary source of information about Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (Meadows, 1996). Cooke described going to great lengths to attract mainstream media attention for the Yabun concert on Australia's national holiday, showcasing Indigenous talent and attended by 12,000 people. 'I busted my gut to get Yabun on mainstream media. I thought, this is not just for us! This is for everybody to come along!' (Cooke, 2004). Cooke's efforts were unsuccessful: 'what do we have to do to get something positive on air?' Similarly, the issue of reparation of wages stolen from Aboriginal workers was the source of considerable discussion on Koori Radio, yet 'these are things that haven't been discussed in mainstream media because mainstream media don't want to give it any legs' (Cooke, 2004). The picture that emerges here is of a vibrant Indigenous counter-public sphere which operates in parallel to the mainstream but with relatively little influence on it. Possibilities for dialogue with the majority non-Indigenous community are envisaged and welcome where they occur, yet self-representation in the wider public sphere remains limited, determined largely by non-Indigenous concerns and conventions.

With Koori FM we find hopes but relatively little in the way of clear strategies for achieving change in the mainstream public sphere, although processes of community participation, self-representation and the development of counter-narratives are effectively developed. Our final example suggests something of the possibilities and the difficulties of directly addressing the mainstream public sphere.

### The Forum on Australia's Islamic Relations (FAIR)

So far we have examined in Assyrian SBS Radio and Koori Radio two contrasting relations between the mainstream public sphere and community media. Subsidy-at-a-distance or long-term opposition: are these the only possibilities in a global city such as Sydney?

Our third example, FAIR, suggests an alternative, in fact a whole space of negotiation between parallel counter-public spheres and the mainstream. FAIR is a new organization, currently reliant largely on volunteer effort and operating out of a small office a few miles out of Sydney's centre. Assessment must be more in terms of aims and philosophy than established achievements, but these are original enough for this to be justified.

FAIR was formed in May 2003 in a highly conflictual situation: first, the Muslim community in Sydney was fractured along lines of country of origin, language and religious emphasis; second, the occupation of Iraq, and the 'war on terror' created potentially threatening living conditions for Muslims in all countries closely associated with the USA; third, an unsatisfactory relationship with mainstream Australian media in terms of representations of Islam and ordinary Muslims.<sup>9</sup> FAIR's aim was to challenge those conditions.

Given the breadth of its aim yet limited resources (FAIR is funded privately without state subsidy), FAIR lacked the option of working exclusively through media production. To 'find some bridge between [the] issues that become stumbling blocks for democracy and Islamic societies to converge,' as the Director, Kuranda Seyit, put it, their strategy required a range of small-scale tactics, combining media production, media education and media lobbying. FAIR is not therefore 'community media' in the traditional sense, yet it casts important light onto the space where community media operates and the public sphere generally. Its emphasis on dialogue and education links to Charles Husband's interest in communication *across* communities in multi-ethnic societies.

FAIR differs from most community media in starting not from an exclusive relationship with a 'home' community, but from an attempt to modify inter-community relations. It is oriented towards the public sphere as a whole, and not just its media aspects, emphasizing also interfaith dialogue that occurs well out of the media's sight. This sets it apart from many Islamic welfare organizations in Sydney and the factionalism that Seyit sees as underlying their proliferation.

Traditionally, the Islamic community seems to . . . work or gravitate towards welfare and education . . . [But] the Islamic community is fractured along

ethnic lines, so that's one of the problems we have . . . disunity . . . So, what FAIR is trying to do . . . is really PR. Public relations, in terms of improving the public image of Muslims and Islam. (Seyit, 2004)

More broadly, Seyit has a long-term view of the problematic relations between Islam and 'the West'; what he modestly calls 'PR' is an attempt to change the terms on which those relations are conducted. For this, misleading media representations of Islam must be countered, above all the impression that Islam is homogeneous: 'we only see a small window, a small frame, of the whole picture, and if we were to interview all the different Islamic organizations, you would get close to thirty or forty different public impressions' (Seyit, 2004).

In addition, Islamic groups of all sorts need, he argues, a better relationship with mainstream media, yet at present lack an adequate media strategy. FAIR's proposed solution is to act as a 'buffer' between mainstream media and small Islamic groups and prevent the relationship between a potential Islamic counter-public sphere and the mainstream public sphere becoming purely oppositional. Clearly this is a complex ambition and FAIR's practice is diverse, ranging from conventional community media production (a small circulation newspaper distributed through mosques and shops; a website giving detail about FAIR's current campaigns), to media training (including training in media lobbying and speaking to media), to media monitoring, to FAIR's own campaigning (press releases and legal challenges against media and other public institutions for inaccurate representations of Islam or Muslims).

FAIR's aim is nothing less than a reform of mainstream media's treatment of Islam, challenging not just the sensationalism of mainstream coverage but also mainstream media's lack of interest in covering positive dialogue between Islam and other faiths:

There is clearly a lot of commonalities between us and the non-Muslims, Christians and Jews . . . But . . . it's very difficult to get that message across, because the media don't want to support that view. They like Islam as an alien, foreign, strange, exotic religion . . . They want to maintain the enigma so it becomes a drawcard for media and newspaper sales. (Seyit, 2004)

FAIR relies here on more than idealism; it wants to insert itself as a primary source in the production of representations of Islam, while FAIR also encouraging academics, business and other leaders from Sydney's Islamic communities to come forward as 'media spokespersons'.

FAIR thus addresses a 'community' audience through its newspaper and radio broadcasts, but the primary interest is in reaching a main-

stream or 'general public' via the mainstream media. The aim is to influence mainstream reporting so as to impact on mass audiences, intervening in the mainstream public sphere rather than creating an alternative public space. The audiences actually reached by its activities are almost impossible to ascertain, but it is clear that Seyit himself has become a high profile and well-respected news source, quoted in international news coverage (O'Riordan, 2005).

Its desire to intervene in the broader process of mediation marks FAIR off from NGOs whose main concern is to lobby for a particular story and from community media whose exclusive concern is with media production. Most striking for our broader theme of the globalized public sphere is FAIR's attempt, from within an Islamic perspective, to open up debates about the nature of the 'reason' that underpins the public sphere itself.

The challenge has three aspects. First, Seyit argues for the right of Islam itself to be seen as a tradition of reason with a long association with scientific and philosophical enquiry, a call recently echoed by some secular writers in the 'West' (Buck-Morss, 2003). Second, this call for discussion between different approaches to reason is linked to a view of Islam as providing a reasoned order within everyday life based on clear principles and individual study. Third, this account of reason opens out onto a search for a media ethics in an age of global conflict and multiple news sources, an ethics whose scope goes far beyond a journalist's rule book:

[T]hese days it's very hard to distinguish between ... the ethics of journalism [and] the ethics of just being a person, or being a student, or being a politician. They're all intertwined ... because the world is being redefined in terms of how one perceives one another, how we relate to one another, the parameters that we live within. So ... we want to ... be a part of that definition and ... be able to impose our perspectives onto the way [media] ethics and morality are perceived. (Seyit, 2004)

This sounds abstract but is based in a pragmatic sense of the new dialogues such an ethics requires:

[W]e need more people who are from Arabic descent but who have been brought up here and educated here and can engage in dialogue in a way that a very common Australian person would totally be able to tune in with. (Seyit, 2004)

We are close here to the 'enlarged way of thinking' that for Hannah Arendt (1961: 221, quoted in Benhabib, 1992: 133) was essential if a 'crisis in culture' was to be overcome.

This combination of the pragmatic (what Seyit calls 'DIY media activism') and the idealistic makes FAIR distinctive – both grounded in the everyday realities of news production and operating at right-angles to media practices that rely on exclusive definitions of identity for their focus and motive, both drawing on broad ideas from Islamic thought (the global Umma or community) and engaging critically with the notion of reasoned argument at the heart of the public sphere itself.

### Conclusion

This article has sought to explore how in a city crossed by many global flows, such as Sydney, community media take on many forms which cannot be reduced to the basic models that public sphere theory implies. Our three examples are best interpreted not as parts of a unitary public sphere, nor simply as counter-public spheres operating in parallel to a unitary mainstream public sphere, nor as local public 'sphericules' floating unattached to any shared space of dialogue. On the contrary, Assyrian SBS Radio, Koori Radio and FAIR are best understood as being differently positioned along two dimensions: first, each is differentiated from the mainstream public sphere to some degree, but only Koori Radio aspires to offer a counter-public sphere in the strict sense; second, each is potentially contributing over the longer term to a larger space of dialogue with the mainstream, but only FAIR has an explicit current strategy for addressing the mainstream directly (Koori Radio's is constrained by the exclusionary limits of the mainstream, while Assyrian SBS Radio is focused more on transnational politics and connections, and overcoming the extreme scarcity of media resources within the global Assyrian diaspora).

More broadly our three cases exemplify not so much a simple notion of 'counter-public spheres', but rather the complexity masked by that term. They confirm the salience of Asen and Brouwer's concern with the 'quality of relation *between* publics' (2001: 8, added emphasis). It cannot be sufficient for understanding the ethical and political implications of a communication space such as Sydney simply to track its diverse elements, like separate species. We need to understand the dynamics that constrain, but may also enable, future interrelations between those elements: to identify a thousand counter-public spheres is not enough. On the contrary, the need for dialogue becomes all the more pressing as the 'ethnoscapes' (Appadurai, 1990) of global cities become more complex and the conflicts of global politics more entrenched. In that sense, the uneven flows of globalization complicate irreversibly our

understanding both of the manifold nature of the 'public sphere' as a concept and of the contribution public sphere(s) may make in particular places to a democracy that can be sustained.

### Notes

- 1 Recently Habermas has explored the possibility of a transnational European public sphere (Habermas, 2001) but this extension of his model is too specific to concern us here.
- 2 Although Sassen does not explicitly mention Sydney in her original analysis of global cities (1991), it has featured in her subsequent elaborations, and Sydney certainly fits the definition of
 

cities that are strategic sites in the global economy because of their concentration of command functions and high-level producer-service firms oriented to world markets; more generally, cities with high levels of internationalisation in their economy and in their broader social structure. (Sassen, 2000: 177)
- 3 We use the term 'community media' deliberately (cf. Jankowski and Prehn, 2001) since it fits our three cases well, leaving aside the wider debate about which term best fits non-mainstream media.
- 4 Compare Peters's general criticism of Habermas's original public sphere model because its excessively abstract account of communication prevents us imagining adequately *alternative* models of participatory media (1993: 565).
- 5 Both authors wish to acknowledge the support and assistance of Greg Gow in the early stages of writing this article.
- 6 All interview quotations are respectively from Younan (2004), Cooke (2004) and Seyit (2004).
- 7 Personal communication with the authors.
- 8 Indigenous Australians are massively overrepresented at every level of the criminal justice system and in all measures of socio-economic disadvantage.
- 9 As background to the last point, there were moral panics in the media around asylum seekers and 'ethnic' gang violence impinging on many communities including the Muslim community (see Jacka and Green, 2003).

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