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Technology And Alternative Media For Development

by

Chua Siew Keng
Conference on Communication, Technology and Development:  
Alternatives for Asia, KL, Malaysia 25 -27 June 1993

Address on “Technology and Alternative Media for Development: A Case Study in setting up an alternative television channel: Community and Educational Television in a rural area in Australia”.

by Chua Siew Keng,
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My paper will deal with the case study of the establishment of a community and educational television channel based in a rural area in Australia. I will briefly discuss the notion of alternative media, the television scene in terms of policy and structure in Australia and the economic and community needs of the region in this case study.

What is alternative media?

Alternative media is a term that can be applied to a number of different cultural activities. However, such media can be distinguished from the mainstream media such as the big broadcasting and cable companies or newspapers. Downing (1990:181) reserves the term for certain categories of media that are politically dissident and offer radical alternatives to mainstream debate. Real public issues such as homelessness, poverty, racism, AIDS, ecology, military support for despotic foreign governments, are mostly on the margins of mainstream political debate. So ‘alternative is quite an extensive zone for serious political debate. Another consideration in discussing alternative media is the notion of the ‘active’ audience as distinct from an audience that is passive, inert. Active audiences are ‘but one step away from being media creators and producers themselves’. Downing quotes Brecht on radio:

Radio should be converted from a distribution system to a communication system. Radio could be the most wonderful public communication system imaginable, a gigantic system of channels - could be that is if it were capable not only of transmitting but of receiving, of making the listener not only hear but also speak, not of isolating him but of connecting him. This means that radio would have to give up being a purveyor and organise the listener as purveyor. (Brecht 1983:169).
What Brecht said sums up the essence of the alternative media idea, namely, the creation of horizontal linked communication networks which empowers the public/audience. Such networks contrast sharply with the vertical communication flows of the mainstream media owned by giant corporations. Mainstream media tend to be entertainment-oriented and whose perspective on the issues that concern ordinary people being not diverse enough. Their communication flows tend to be vertical and top-down, from them to us and we can only express our viewpoints through letters.

Television in Australia

Television has been called 'overwhelmingly the most pervasive contemporary mass medium' (Collins 1990:22). In most parts of the world, television is central in its reach, its power and influence, and its popularity. Since its inception in 1956, television has become a feature in every Australian home. In 1990 there was at least one television set in 99% of Australian households, a total of 5,507,603 television households while a significant and growing percentage of households possess more than one television set and a video recorder.

A number of indicators has shown that television has an extensive reach and occupies a central position as the main source of much information in Australian society. Cunningham states that:

> It is now well established by numerous surveys over a considerable period of time that television has largely displaced the newspaper as the prime and most trusted source of news for the majority of the population. Another clear indicator is the extent to which television has influenced political and other public processes in Australian society. Whatever variety of perspectives are held about 'image politics', it is undoubted that television image management is now a central fact of the political process. Although this kind of role carries with it significant problems, it remains the case that television (albeit supported by radio and the press) is the 'glue that holds together much of our sense of ourselves as a society; it is the platform on which whatever passes as public debate and collective sense-making in today's society takes place. (Cunningham and Turner, 1993:19 )

Australians spend a great deal of leisure time watching television. The most recent figures suggest that Australians watch television on average about 22 hours 45 minutes per week. (Estimates of adult radio listening put it at about 23 hours per week, but much of this is done in the context of other activities such as commuting and
work). Recent findings using the new electronic form of audience measurement, people meters, for television introduced in Australia in 1990, have shown that Australians watch more television than previously thought.

Australian television has a dual system of broadcasting, incorporating both the British and the American models. There is a mix of or primarily government funded channels, ABC and SBS, with commercial channels such as Channels Seven, Nine and Ten, which are owned by big corporations.

The principles guiding the allocation of licenses has centred on 'localism'. Television stations were licensed to service particular local areas, be they metropolitan or regional. It was expected to reflect local concerns and be owned by local interests. There was no formal provision in the legislation for national networks - a form of defacto recognition was accorded through audience reach rules in the late 1980s. Consequently according to Cunningham, 'the great unofficial story of Australian television is the development of defacto networks; how they have evolved, despite their absence from the systems of regulation and the way principles of localism and networking have competed more and more to the detriment of localism. (Cunningham and Turner, 1993: 24).

The broadcasting system is established under the Broadcasting Act 1942 (with the exception of the ABC, for which legislation is contained in the Australian Broadcasting Corporation Act 1983), which:

- sets out the service areas for radio and television,
- limits the number of services which can be provided in any area,
- sets out a scheme of licensing and prohibits anyone broadcasting without a licence,
- lays down a system as to who can hold licences, and on which criteria licence applicants will be judged,
- introduces requirements which licensees have to meet in the operations of their services,
- provides for regular oversight and review of licensees if they are to have their licences renewed.

These provisions apply to the commercial sector and the public sector, though not to the national sector (which embraces the ABC and the SBS). Amendments to the
Broadcasting Act in 1977 established the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal (renamed in October 1992 as the Australian Broadcasting Authority), an independent statutory authority, to regulate the commercial and public sectors, and opened the Tribunal's processes to a relatively high degree of public participation. (Cunningham 1992:26-7)

Although the broadcasting industry is comparatively highly regulated in structure and content, the way the legislation has been administered by government also has protected the commercial industry's viability, in part by limiting competition by not approving new commercial services and by delaying the introduction of new media such as pay television. (Cunningham 1992: 27)

Australia's dual system structure of television broadcast has ensured a high degree of long-term structural strength despite its rapid changes in the patterns of ownership in the 1980s. However, in Australia, commercial television has always been dominant.

Current issues confronting the television system in Australia include the transformation of the system where the national sector is facing the question of supplementing government funding with sponsorship or advertisements. Australia has also to deal with the challenges of internationalisation and economic rationalisation of cultural regulation and subsidy. The system will expand with the addition of community and educational television as well as Pay TV. There is also Australian International Television which broadcasts to parts of South East Asia. However, despite the challenges of internationalisation, the ABT's general objective that there should be about 50 per cent Australian content on television means that the system remains identifiable indigenous while enjoying a structured, controlled access to a mix of US, British and other material.

What is community television?

Community Television is a communications medium that exists strongly throughout Europe, the USA and Canada. Its use is for a local community by that community. Until very recently such Broadcast was not permitted in Australia on a full time basis. A recent Government Inquiry into the "Sixth Channel" has permitted Community Access Television use of the Channel to establish until 1997, when a review of that Channel (strictly allocated for non-commercial use) will be held. In any case, community television has a long-term future in Australia's development.

LINC TV (Local Information Network Community Television) states that:
Community Television is about COMMUNITY INFORMATION, a localised service through which individuals and groups can exchange, access and present with the most effective communication service to date. (LINC Information Sheet, 1992).

Community television is television that is owned and operated by the community to provide representative broadcast service. It is similar to community radio in that it operates on a largely voluntary basis and has a localised service area. That is, it operates on a local, regional scale rather than a national level. It caters to a community by that community and has strong policies, charters, structure and conflict resolution training to enable broad based community involvement at all time. It is committed to enabling equitable and participate access, and the use of new technologies which are economical and practical.

Profile of the Far North Coast

The region to be served by LINC TV is the northernmost part of the Far North Coast, located almost immediately south of the border of Queensland in New South Wales. It is an area of about 15,000 square Kilometres or about 5 to 6 times the size of Singapore. It has a composite population of around 130,000 people living in rural farmlands, cane plantations, orchards, communes, small towns with its centre in the city of Lismore (population 40,000). The region has an university campus of New England with a student population of around 6,000.

A large proportion of the growth in the Far North Coast is in and around a number of coastal centres. However, there are also significant numbers of people who live in smaller towns, rural villages and farms. One of the problems for this area is that because of the relative isolation from tertiary education opportunities has led to low retention rates for students at high schools. There are high levels of youth unemployment and/or young people leaving the area for possible work opportunities elsewhere. With low educational levels, these people frequently drift back to country areas where it is cheaper to live as they find it hard to acquire jobs in the cities.

Demographic, economic and environmental characteristics

The region has one of the highest unemployment rates in the state. At the same time, there has been a large influx of people migrating from the south, from Sydney, Melbourne and other parts of Australia in recent years.

The sub-tropical environment with its very comfortable, mild climate and spectacular semi-tropical lush landscapes of mountains, valleys and beaches has attracted a large
influx of people from harsher climates in these severe economic times. It is also the favourite retirement area for many from the south. The main industry in the region is agriculture and livestock. The environment is also a fragile asset. Recent growth is putting agricultural land under pressure for residential development.

Because of the diversity of its population mix, this region with its combination of old and new settlers, rural hinterland, intensive village settlement and a changing economic future, there is also a diverse and rapidly evolving demand for training and education to meet the demands of a service industry. This would include specialised skills in health care and services for elderly people. At the same time tourism and hospitality, local government management, financial planning and strategic planning are also areas which need training skills.

A large number of Year 12 school leavers also leave the region because of a lack of higher educational facilities. The most recent survey undertaken by the Department of Planning indicated that 47% intended leaving the region after completing high school and 64% of these indicated they were doing so to pursue further education.

At the same time the increasing participation of women in the workforce (from 32% to 42% in the region in the last six years) and the high percentage of single parents in the region indicate a special need for education and retraining. External delivery of training with an element of face-to-face teaching has been identified as a preferred form of education for this sector of the population.

The less labour intensive traditional agricultural industry will remain an important part of the regional economy while enterprises which add value to agricultural products, forestry and tropical agricultural research have been identified as a potential source of growth.

Tourism is probably the most rapidly expanding industry. It is labour intensive and will create substantial employment opportunities. On the North Coast employment in the tourism industry has tended to be focussed in small enterprises and there are problems of seasonality, but the Gold Coast to the immediate north and Coffs Harbour and Port Macquarie to the immediate south have many larger and potentially stable hotel establishments, and consideration is currently being given to the establishment of a major resort by Club Med at Byron Bay in the near future.

Another area of growth which is less easy to measure is arts, crafts and cultural activities. There has been an emergence of a strong and diverse arts industry in the region, which, while unable to provide a full income for many people, may be significant in providing a much needed secondary income, and certainly helps
promote other areas of economic activity such as tourism and local business development.

The area’s reputation for alternative culture is also leading to the development of several small alternative enterprises. The region has a reputation for being at the forefront of social and cultural change.

While there is considerable potential in the region economically, most of the standard indicators suggest a region with economic problems. Average incomes are amongst the lowest in NSW. The area has the highest reliance on social security payments of any region in the State. At the 1986 Census, less than 3% of the Northern Rivers region’s workforce had a degree qualification and almost 63% had no qualification at all.

Unemployment levels are consistently amongst the highest at a local and regional level of any in the State (16.4%) compared with the 10.6% State-wide in August 1992. Labour force growth has been steady, although participation rates remain below the NSW State average (55% compared with 62%). Youth employment is particularly severe (28% in August 1992 compared with 19% State-wide) and many young people continue to leave the region seeking employment and educational opportunities. The poverty of the region, the high rated of unemployment taken with comparatively low participation rate in higher education indicate a strong need for post-school delivery of educational services.

**LINC TV and its relevance to the region’s community needs**

LINC TV is community owned and operated television with links to community and educational institutions. It was granted the sixth television channel license in Australia in April this year. LINC had been preparing for this in seriousness over the last year and have had two pilot broadcasting periods in the last 12 months. LINC will go to air in September this year as Australia’s first community television channel.

LINC plans to provide courses, to educate and train unemployed, disadvantaged/rural people and those who missed out on placement in the major institutions in the region. Its main emphasis will be training through either hands-on experience or distance education via computer networking and television broadcast.

The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Transport, Communications and Infrastructure (HRSCTCI) Inquiry Recommendations states that it be given a community broadcaster’s license for a test period of three years to establish a regular service to examine the viability of community television.
LINC TV is also the first Regional Community Television in Australia and also the first to get a three year license. The other community channels are based in Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide. They will begin transmission at a slightly later date than LINC. Brisbane has also applied for a community television channel and it is envisaged that other cities will follow suit. LINC's participation into the House of Representatives Inquiry helped secure Community Television as a reality.

LINC TV has sought to establish a broad community base and it coordinated over 500 volunteers nationally (including 300 locally), in its first test broadcast. People want to be involved and they want to learn. A Community Council has been formed to assist issues of access and equity and is currently drawing up detailed policy. LINC will provide a diversified service which guarantees access and equity in decision making processes, and in the production and transmission of material by groups and individuals in the service area. Its policy making body consists of the Community Council.

This Council, which represents the diversity of the north Coast Community, is largely a policy making body. It handles decisions of community access to facilities, access to airtime and complaints. It meets every 4 to 6 weeks as needed. Eight community sectors have been identified and sector has established its own committee that covers the breadth of its spectrum. These committees are Spiritual, Youth, Arts, Environment, Sports/Recreation, Unemployed, Rural, Education and Community Media. These committees are likely to be subtracted or added to according to periodic assessment of community needs. The alteration of community representation will be adjusted at a General Meeting (Special/AGM). A balance of gender and race constitutes the membership of the Council which has a representative from each of these committees.

CC members have a charter to respect others and their beliefs while working on the committee and council, a genuine commitment to the interests of the community, excellent communication skills, and be prepared to participate in workshops where necessary, including conflict resolution and meeting skills workshops.

Among LINC TV's other objectives is to bring New Technologies into the hands of the community. (Literally to create an accessible hands on training experience.) It is a body that will train and facilitate the community to communicate and learn using telecommunications.
As each Australian community is diverse in itself, so are its needs. It is not possible for national television services to cater to a great diversity of needs, as recognised by the Department of Transport and Communication. (Access and Equity Plan 1992 -94, Transport and Communications Portfolio, Dept of Prime Minister and Cabinet).

(Brief History of LINC TV's Establishment)

LINC became a Registered Incorporation Association on the 17 September 1991. It conducted its first pre-test transmission broadcast to Lismore and surrounding area two months later on the 12 December, 1991 for 12 days, 24 hours a day and the second broadcast on 27 May, 1992 for the same period of time. It completed its in depth research into community needs applicable to community television service in the Far North Coast region on the 11 November, 1991. LINC TV had sought support from various sectors of the business, government, local and educational institutions.

Its strategy in maintaining community support includes on-going activities in lobbying government and private organisations and holding public meetings to ensure a two-way communication process between the television workers and members of the community. It has also compiled a volunteers register.

LINC directors lobbied and addressed the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Community Television Inquiry on the rights of community television having exclusive rights to the sixth high power television broadcasting channel on 28 May 1992. The Standing committee recommended that LINC be given the 6 Television channel on 10 September 1992.

LINC TV was publicly handed over to the community at its first AGM on the 17 November, 1992. On this day a community council, which would design and enforce policy decisions, maintaining community ownership of LINC TV, through equal and fair representation of the diverse community sectors of the Far North Coast was constituted. It aims to be financially viable within three years after the beginning of full time broadcast, ie by 1996. It has appointed legal and auditors.

It has already embarked on a five-week training programme for its five full time/part time co-ordinators since 12 May 1993 with the CES through DEET and plans to start training and education classes for the community in July.

It applied for and successfully gained government funding for capital equipment. DASSET (Department of the Arts, Sport, the Environment, Tourism and territories)
gave LINC a grant of $25,000 for production equipment on 25 January, 1993. At the moment, LINC is exploring avenues for bridging finance to purchase equipment for production facilities in order to access the grant money which can only be given upon receipt of purchased equipment.

Technical setup (Resources and Budget)

Infrastructure:

To use the existing infrastructure currently owned by DOTAC and serviced by Telecom at MT NARD. Initially, for the July to September test period a 200-watt transmitter and a 10 DB 115 Degree Horizontal pattern antennae, altogether costing $30,000 to be installed on hill behind showground which houses a private radio tower for car phone. A technical team of 6 volunteers - technicians with a range of communications, amateur radio and redundant local transport and communications workers, a microwave link will be set up at Mt Nardi for the September broadcast.

Service area:

50 Km radius to include Murwillumbah, Lower Tweed, Byron Bay, Ballina, Alstonville, Lismore, Nimbin and Kyogle in far north New South Wales. This comprises a total population of around 130,000 people.

Frequency: UHF 50

Transmission power: 100,000 watts ERP

This option was decided upon by consultation with a broad based section of community representatives, although considerably more expensive the community demand is wide. Representatives decided this area as being large enough to maintain a fulltime service financially and by resources while being small enough to maintain a sense of community. The area described is a cohesive, yet diverse community with ample personal, business and resource support. It is an area which has demanded community television. However, the disadvantages are that the establishment and on-going costs would be considerably expensive. At the same time, the convenience of an already established tower, antennae and associated translator sites is an advantage.

Studios and equipment

The initial cost of studio equipment will be met by the $25,000 grant for edit suites and cameras. There will be three stages of broadcast: Test stage from July to September 3 - 4 hours on weekends. Second stage 4-5 hours per day five days a week from September
for three months, then 24 hours a day for five days slowly increasing to seven days as
demand dictates. LINC has a no restriction on advertising, free to air, drop-through
narrowcast license. However, sponsorship will be limited to up to a maximum of
only one third of air time.

Management structure

LINC is governed by a Board of Directors consisting of a Chair, Secretary, Treasurer
and two other members. The board is elected by the voting members of LINC TV. The
Board is advised by an Advisory Council comprising members with legal, financial,
policy, corporate, technical, production and community expertise. The Community
Council comprising about 25 members advises on community representation, access
and programming. Day to day running of the station is in the hands of the station
manager and a team of co-ordinators in the areas of administration, programmes,
production, marketing, technical and training and education.

LINC’s relationship with educational institutions in assisting the delivery of higher
education.

LINC TV has negotiated successfully to establish a formal agreement with the UNENF
so that media degree students (production assignments, journalism assignments etc)
can facilitate LINC’s production and computer Multi Media studios for practical /
hands on experience in a professional working environment. This agreement will be
formalised in July.

It has designed an education package for all high schools on the Far North Coast
covering all aspects of print and television media to assist in education of youth in the
information multi-media.

It will formulate a guide on how best to use accessible information to advance youth
courier prospects, in the information industries. At the same time this will help
develop self worthiness through hands on experience, and development of
marketable video presentations shown on LINC TV locally as well as through other
community television stations nationally and / or internationally in Europe and
America. A co-ordinator for this section has recently been employed on a voluntary
basis.

It will open a shop front in August at its new premises which is housed in the upper
floor of a large two-storey building which was the Public Works building until
recently. The shop will sell LINK TV merchandise and other locally produced video,
music and retail items that are not easily accessible for the public. A shop manager will also be employed.

Among its other activities it has organised a number of functions to raise funds, set up a trust fund for public monies to set aside for documentaries produced through LINC TV. It will establish formal agreement with the department of agriculture for information access and Human Resource exchange for tutorial and Distant Education facilities.

Its long term goals include the following:

1. To be financially viable within three years.
2. To be a central point for all information networks to access all available public information so as to improve local productivity in business, education and multimedia centres in the Far North Coast region.
3. To establish Lismore as the information centre for the Far North Coast.
4. To create more employment opportunities with in LINC, help train prospective staff for local business, help set up small businesses through training and information accessibility within LINC or referred government and private services.

Interface with Telecentre

On 8 June LINC submitted an application to the Department for Industries and Energy for a grant of $185,000 for the purchase of capital equipment and the salary of manager to set up a centrally located Telecentre to interface with LINC TV to integrate the latest communication Multi-Media technologies. such a Telecentre would give rural people access to information and technology not otherwise available to them, providing an accessible public information base/billboard, connected to all public information facilities with in the Far North Coast region, nationally and globally. It will use computer networking facilities to connect with 10 distance learning centres located in small townships in this region. the manager's job is to liaise with a number of regional councils the region, various community groups and government departments as well as with the business community.
The aim of such an interface is to establish a central point for information dissemination, training and education bridging courses through central and distant education with the latest updated computer related online/modem. It has yet to purchase computers for training and education, (Central and Distant Education), via modem/online. LINC plans to establish a research and development sector to develop CD Rom and video software packages, other new technological products and to conduct relevant research for local businesses.

LINC TV / TELECENTRE

The Telecentre aims to provide the Far North Coast region with accessible, innovative telecommunications service via computers and accessible broadcast technology which will inspire creative use and development of the regions facilities and services. It plans to be financially viable within two years.
Among its specific objectives are:

1. to provide access to other information networks and Data bases, accredited media courses through Telecentre / LINC TV, training and education equipment and technology for local / distant users.

2. to promote and inform people of the Far North Coast region of the possible uses of the Telecentre, better employment prospects through training and education and use of innovative Telecentre computer related technologies as well as support Local Business through interaction with the Telecentre's information medium.

3. to create an educational product to be marketed locally, Nationally and internationally on CD-ROM, Video and print.

4. to develop and expand the services of the Telecentre throughout the region, and service centres in the outlying areas.

Once LINC - TELECENTRE is established. LINC will be able to offer its services in training as a source of income through the Commonwealth Employment Service. The Telecentre interlink will be set up in four months' time.

Conclusion

As Stuart Cunningham in Framing Culture: Criticism and Policy in Australia, (1992, p 23 - 25) notes:

Historically, radio and television have been administered within communications portfolios that have placed greater emphasis on technological, engineering and economic factors in formulating policy than on cultural factors. In the same period as this structure was being consolidated (with the introduction of television in the mid-1950s), a subsidy or welfare approach by government to culture (understood first as the traditional arts and later film and emergent art forms) was developed and continues to this day. The significance and influence of this administrative division of the world of culture cannot be over emphasised.....

Communications and media are found within the Department of Transport and Communications (DOTAC), a key market department administering the structure and operations of infrastructure (such as transport and telecommunications) vital to the communications needs of the country....
On the other hand the placement of culture and the arts in federal ministries has almost always indicated their low status as a welfare-like sector. They are currently placed within a line department—indeed, a department without a coherent identity: the Department of the Arts, Sport, the Environment, Tourism reflecting their perceived ambassadorial or symbolic value, have been placed as an adjunct within the Prime Minister's department (for instance, during the Whitlam Labor government in the early 1970s), they have typically found themselves within junior ministries and spoken for by junior ministers. Thus it is not surprising that the compartmentalisation of media and communications, on the one hand, and culture and the arts, on the other, builds in a steep hierarchical relationship.

Community television is a project straddling the arts and the industry portfolios. As such it tests the government oversights and funding bodies' ambits. This could create some problems in seeking grants and in the policy areas. At the same time, CTV's strength is also in pulling together the arts and communications and economic industries. CTV can give community arts, spiritual, sport, education, as well as local business industries a much better airing than commercial or national television.

The most serious issue remains the tension between economic viability and community needs. Community television is as good as its resources (both economic and human) allow it to be. In the Northern Rivers Region, there appears to be no shortage of vision, talent, hard work and willingness on the part of the community to volunteer their energy and time. The constraints are largely economic. Even then, there appears to be no shortage of schemes to overcome these.

LINC's project to interface with a Telecentre is a step in the right direction in meeting the needs of the community for high technology information and education. It is a mark of how seriously it takes its mission as a disseminator of information and its concern with equitable access to communications and new technologies.

There is no doubt that if successful, LINC will make a substantial contribution to the development of communications and high technology information access to the region under discussion. It has prepared the ground well in developing a strong web of informational links with the regional university, other tertiary institutions, the media industry and local business, community and government organisations.
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