

# RADIO NORFOLK

## Community and Communication on Norfolk Island

Rebecca Coyle

(Southern Cross University, Lismore, Australia)

### Introduction

My interest and research into the radio service on Norfolk Island commenced with a three-month residency in 1999.<sup>[1]</sup> Both my research and my experiences on the island brought to mind the contradictions and tensions between public and private, as well as between global and local, which seemed significant then and still affect island identities today. These aspects pertain to the radio service on the island insofar as Radio Norfolk is both a highly localised service while at the same time a conduit for broadcasts from elsewhere, some of which represent Norfolk Island back to itself through news coverage of island events.<sup>[2]</sup>

These issues relate to the terms ‘communication’ and ‘community’ in the title of my paper. Regardless of which theoretical frame of reference is employed, ‘communication’ suggests the fundamental factors of initiator, recipient, mode or vehicle, message and effect. The conduit metaphor of communication seems to inform some functions of the radio service on Norfolk Island, where the medium is used to transmit basic information. However, such information is produced and broadcast in the context of cooperative constructions of meaning,<sup>[3]</sup> and so the radio service represents a shared arrangement—a common or mutual process—amongst broadcasters and listeners on a small island. Jason Loviglio (2005) discusses “radio’s intimate public” where radio voices move with impunity between, and challenge, constructed realms of public and private. In a local context, the public ‘voice’ adopted by the radio station in terms of its station policies and announcer language style can be loaded with intimate knowledges about island life. This is where the ‘community’ term comes into my discussion, which I will draw upon in relation to the notion of ‘communities of interest’. I will show how Radio Norfolk serves the interests of the island Administration, while also addressing various audience groups and participating in island life. Focusing largely on talk programme elements, my approach attempts to address what Jackie Cook argues is a failing of much radio talk research, that is:

*It has too often failed to deal with that talk as ‘text’, specifically situated within complex layers of radio production and listener reception, as well as socially and culturally*

*embedded within established discourses.* (Cook, 2000:60)

Without taking into account the various ways by which talk broadcasts on Radio Norfolk communicate, the station's functions and uses within the island community cannot be fully comprehended.

## Norfolk Island Media Services

As a brief introduction to Norfolk Island media, there are two main categories. First, media services from outside sources, including radio broadcasts (initially on shortwave) from the 1920s, then newspaper deliveries from Australia, and only recently television broadcasts from the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), Australian commercial Channel 7, Imparja (controlled by the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association) and Australian multilingual Special Broadcasting Service (SBS). The second media category is Norfolk Island media services. The earliest formalised communication form was public notices displayed on the 'tree of knowledge' in a main road (Pine Avenue) and, later on, various newsletter style newspapers were introduced. Radio has taken on this role of providing news and information but tailored to local audiences and within Administration requirements. There are now regular newspaper, radio, television, telecommunications, internet web sites and email services produced by islanders for islanders.<sup>[4]</sup>

Three crucial factors inform the media services on Norfolk Island: population, governance and language. Today, the stable population of the island—now about 2000—comprises about 40 percent Pitcairn Island descendants (although this designation is debated) and the remainder made up of Australians, New Zealanders and other international residents. About 30,000 tourists visit the island every year. Tourism became the key island industry, beginning in the 1960s, and brought different demands for media services.

Australia was given governance over Norfolk Island by the British in 1913 and the island became an Australian external territory. This is a contentious point with many islanders who feel a closer affinity with Britain, and who also resent any intervention on the part of the Australian government in terms of laws and regulations. In 1979, the island was given self-governance over many of its operations and now works with an Australian Administration and locally appointed Legislative Assembly and public servants (see Hoare, 1999; O'Collins, 2002). One area of local governance is broadcasting and this has complex implications for local controls of copyright, content regulation and media business.<sup>[5]</sup>

Although the main language now spoken on the island is English, Pitcairn descendants originally came to the island with a language formed from the English spoken by the mutineers (based on regional variations), together with Tahitian words and phrases, as detailed in the work of Alice Buffett (1999) and Peter Mühlhäusler (2006). Today, Norfolk language (Norf'k) is mainly habitually spoken by older residents. From 1913 until the 1960s, the language was banned from use at school, and only relatively recently have intermittent language classes been introduced to the curriculum. Norf'k is

spoken in some form by some younger people (many of whom have been educated abroad and later married non-Norfolk speakers). The radio service uses some Norfolk in its programming, although such usage attracts controversy amongst islanders and even amongst presenters themselves. One reason is that, like many Pacific languages, Norfolk is an oral language that has only recently been written down (see Buffett 1999) and officially adopted.<sup>[6]</sup> Subsequently, there is disagreement about who speaks the authentic, correct form and, in fact, whether there is or should be such a thing. This has significance for the radio service.

## The Radio Service

The first radio service was established in the airport in 1952, although this was limited to five or ten minute daily broadcasts giving basic information about ship and aircraft movements and vital notices. It was not until the 1960s that it was expanded to resemble a radio service with music, local notices and ABC programmes sent over for re-broadcast. This station—then called VL2NI and now Radio Norfolk—is still significantly controlled by officers of the island Administration and this has an effect on everything, from local notices to what music is played, and the style of sponsorship announcements. But the Administration has only recently formalised its relationship to the radio station by establishing a Broadcasting Authority.<sup>[7]</sup> A Broadcasting Act was passed in 2003, and the station adopted its first ever Code of Practice shortly after. While Radio Norfolk is funded to a limited extent by the Administration,<sup>[8]</sup> the station also raises money through sponsorship and other commercial ventures. So, in terms of Australian radio station designations, the station resides between a community, public and commercial operation.<sup>[9]</sup>

The station includes programmes by the ABC and Radio New Zealand, mixed in with local programmes and mostly UK/US/Australian music of a middle-of-the-road style. Programme content is largely music-based, featuring a mix of country, mainstream popular and light classical musical items. Once, music was shipped to the station, but in the last two years much of the music is downloaded as MP3 files at minimal cost from online music distributor, Music Point. Breakfast and morning programmes are presented by paid staff employed on a casual basis.<sup>[10]</sup> The programmes feature news from the ABC and Radio New Zealand, local notices, weather and sports reports, and either a live studio interview or the first-run of a pre-recorded interview. Other locally produced shows are ‘drive time’ (4.30pm to early evening) and evening programmes that are presented by volunteers. Although originally it was established as a kind of ‘public address’ medium for the island Administration, more recently entertainment based on specific local interests as well as information and ‘education’ from a variety of global sources have dominated programming.<sup>[11]</sup>

Programme content on Radio Norfolk is affected by the relationship of the station to various audiences and stakeholders. For example, programme content affects the style of radio talk used on-air, the musical choices and genres, as well as news programming. Announcements and notices are often formally worded in vocabulary and language style. In the early days of radio broadcasts, the personal on-air style of announcers was criticised by the current Administrator, and subsequent announcers were required to

type scripts (rather than make impromptu remarks) and abide by strict protocols and procedures. These formally worded elements offer a point of contrast with other talk content which oscillates between inconsequential chat (a standard form of radio talk content), item segues, and the occasional local interview or pre-recorded (and sometimes edited) item, to tightly scripted imported material from international radio services.

The Administration (Broadcasting Minister and public servants) also intervenes in musical choices including music genres. Grunge and heavy metal musics are only programmed in specialist timeslots and specific songs with risqué lyrics have been disallowed. Indeed, music programming has been determined by availability of material as much as agreed formatting, and listener complaints or requests rather than a formalised station policy or programming approach.

News programming was once entirely provided by international services, and a disjuncture between global news services and highly localised notices and information is still apparent in the current service. Local radio news tends to avoid controversial issues such as critical or investigative journalism about the local Administration or contentious island activities.<sup>[12]</sup> Instead, radio programmes have featured interviews with Assembly ministers about their activities, and Assembly proceedings are broadcast as ‘live’ recordings rather than reported and analysed. However, it is not just the Administration that affects radio content and approach. Local people have strong views about radio operations and attitudes, and announcers are aware of living in close proximity to both their critics and their fans.

Various elements of the programming on Radio Norfolk are important in conveying a sense of community. One of these is the use of humour. Listener anecdotes, jokes and pre-recorded comedy items broadcast on Radio Norfolk vary depending on what the speaker considers the role of the radio announcer to be (eg ‘voice of authority’ or friendly entertainer), as well as his or her particular sense of humour. Jest and teasing are integral parts of life on Norfolk Island, although announcers are wary of reflecting these in radio commentary when it is felt that there may be personal ramifications or problems for the station that impact at an official level. However, music tracks with pertinent lyrics are often used in request timeslots by island residents to make comments to and about each other. In the absence of phone-in (‘talkback’) or other listener participation programmes, these items and humorous asides serve multiple purposes. They address a specific Norfolk Island communication style and offer a way of commenting on social situations without directly criticising or taking issue.

## Norf’k Broadcasts

One of the most distinct elements of the radio services is its use of Norf’k. From the earliest days, radio broadcasts were only made in English and it is only relatively recently that radio broadcasts have been made in Norf’k. Some announcers from the 1980s became aware of policies in Australia concerning multiculturalism and consciously chose to speak Norf’k on their shows. In 1983, Josie Gillett won an award as host of the ‘Young Mood’ afternoon programme presented in Norf’k. Later, David

(also known as Diddles) Evans hosted evening programmes in which he made announcements in Norf'k, picturing his relative (Bubby) and other Pitcairn descendants as his listeners. Also, in a programme broadcast after school, Diddles ran quizzes for young listeners to guess the meaning of a Norf'k word or phrase, aiming to stimulate interest in Norf'k language and its connection with lifestyle and customs.

Currently, Tracey Yager uses Norf'k occasionally (for example, in an interview with an older Norf'k speaker), but Darlene Buffett is the only announcer to use Norf'k consistently in her programmes. Darlene presents in a form that mixes English and Norf'k, often in the same sentence. Since 1992, when she commenced as a radio announcer, she has increased the proportion of Norf'k used in her shows. Her mixture of English and Norf'k languages has met with some criticism. Older Islanders have commented on what they perceive to be her poor rendition of Norf'k and a misuse of it when mixed with English. Such criticisms do not acknowledge on-going debates about a definitive 'authentic' form of Norf'k or, indeed, Darlene's purpose in using the language in this manner on a radio service aiming to meet the needs of various communities of interest. These debates also highlight the ways in which language confidence can occur. The intimate mode of address used in the radio announcements and the familiar contexts in which the language is heard (often as a 'tertiary' activity, that is, while the listener is engaged in another task such as housework, commuting or in the workplace) can serve as a conscious form of language revitalisation. In relation to the strategies of language revitalisation discussed by Patrick Heinrich (2005), the radio broadcasts incorporating Norf'k represent both the language itself as 'the message' as well as a form that speaks to language users with different levels of proficiency.

While the printed word cannot adequately convey radio flow and vocal timbre, some indicator of the points above can be seen in a transcript of a radio programme. The following quotation is excerpted from a Breakfast show broadcast in 2004 (16 November) in which Darlene provides the opening menu and reads the local news and notices:

*Well, a very guud mornin' all yorlyi and welcome back to Radio Norfuk and we broadcastin' from our studio in New Cascade Road. 89.9 in the FM band and 1566 in the AM band. Darlene with yorlyi fillin' in fer Tracey fer enother Tyuusdi—I keepin' yorlyi company until 9 o'clock this mornin'. Very guud morning to all the other early birds up and doin' on dey Tyuusdi morning the sixteenth of Nowemba 2004. Any walkers and swimmers, bakers, butchahs, café workers, restaurant workers, hotel staff. So'd how's yorlyi. And special greetings to the patients up der in Norfuk Island hospital. I hope yorlyi feelin' a whole lot bettah dis dey. And a special guud mornin' to the staff up there as well. And if anybody home no' feelin' one hundred per cent dis dey, I hope yorlyi feel heaps better real soon. An' no forgettin' fo tellun very good morning to the visitors on our island. Hope you're having a lovely time and if you're leaving us today, we hope you'll come back and see us again real soon. And for all the other sponsors who'll be bringing timecalls throughout the day, very good morning to yorlyi. So 7 o'clock, breakfast time on Radio Norfuk, thanks to our brekky session sponsors, Max's department store, and time for the news.*

[Pre-recorded Sting music and voice-over 'Radio Norfolk—news and information'.]

*And good morning to the Captain and crew of the Norfolk Guardian. Work on the unloading of the Guardian is currently underway at Cascade. Spectators are welcome and are asked to stay clear of all work operations and to park in the car park area. [Pause.] The restored house at number 9 Quality Row will be open today from 10am to 3pm. An admittance charge applies. [Pause.] There will be an organ recital today at St Barnabas chapel between 2.30 and 3.30 and all are welcome. [Pause.] A craft session will be held in the SDA Church Hall this afternoon between the hours of 2 and 4.30. [Pause.] The monthly meeting of the Hospital Auxiliary will be held today in the Mawson units at 2 o'clock. Apologies to Joan please and her phone number is 22767.<sup>[13]</sup>*

This extract is followed by four lengthier notices, then by lost and found items (“firstly lost: kids shoes and things, and found, a black crown bag containing money and stamps”), then sports activities information, service trading hours (“for our visitors on the island”), airport flight arrivals and departures, a detailed weather report including forecasts for major cities in Australia and New Zealand, and concluding with the programme ‘menu’:

*And da's it fer notices for now. I'll repeat it fer yorlyi at 8 o'clock this morning. And also in the program we'll take some 7.30 ABC news this morning, look at the weather in brief. I got a few request for play at around about 20 to 8.*

In her opening, Darlene is consciously addressing both local and visitor listeners, being as inclusive as possible by limiting the Norf'k language elements to non-essential or readily grasped grammar and vocabulary. For the formal news and scripted announcements, Darlene uses the English that has been previously prepared for the written announcements. Tourists are addressed using colloquial English rather than Norf'k. An aspect that is worth noting about this extract—bearing in mind that this is a daily occurring breakfast show—is the almost ceremonial greeting ritual Darlene engages in. It is at once intimate to Norfolk Island in content and address, plus identifying for Darlene herself, while also being inclusive of various listeners. Yet, this intimacy is achieved without the usual employment of specific radio scripting techniques. In formal Western radio training since about the 1970s,<sup>[14]</sup> announcers have been instructed not to use general terms to describe the audience or to address more than one listener, as this breaks the listener's sense of the intimate address between announcer and individual listener. Yet, here the various ‘groups’ addressed by Darlene are clearly identified as such, but the intimacy is retained by a kind of self-knowledge of the specific features of the island and the culture of island life. This is conveyed in the detail of the notices and people named as contact points (including sponsors of various segments in this opening being specifically addressed by their nicknames, such as Les Quintal Farm Tours greeted as ‘Lettuce’). The configuration of audiences making up the island community is communicated in large part by the use of specific language features.

I mentioned the criticism such language use has attracted, although criticism of Norf'k language broadcasts are not unique to Darlene's approach. The late Toon Buffett recalled in the 1980s carefully scripting a programme entirely in (his version of) Norf'k so that the language was supposedly ‘correct’. The programme met with mixed

responses, with some listeners greatly enjoying it while others argued that he didn't know what he was talking about. Following this experience, he questioned the use of mixed English/Norfolk presentation, arguing that the mix of languages may well upset listeners' engagement with the broadcasts as well as break the momentum and flow of the programme and overall station programming. In addition, former Radio Norfolk manager Margaret Meadows recalled that shop assistants working in businesses playing Radio Norfolk broadcasts reported incidents of tourists who, upon hearing the mixed language broadcasts, mistakenly understood the radio service to be a useful vehicle for training islanders 'how to speak English', not realising that for almost all islanders English is the predominant, rather than a second language. Indeed, many young islanders deliberately use a language form culled from modified versions of Norfolk words and phrases together with slang, surfer jargon and other linguistic appropriations (an approach not uncommon in youth and subcultural groups in general). In contrast, among many older Islanders, a particularly formal pronunciation and speech mode is cultivated, possibly modeled on the kind of educated Australian, pakeha or British English heard on ABC, BBC and Radio New Zealand radio services.

Debates around the station's use of Norfolk reflect dissenting views that are apparent in all communities, but also perhaps the lack of an agreed station identity for Radio Norfolk. Since the influx of tourists to the island and issues around self-identification that markedly expanded in the 1970s, debates have arisen over whether and how broadcasts should be directed to tourists as well as islanders, and to which group(s) of islanders—that is, Pitcairn descendants or Australians and New Zealanders. Beyond these issues, though, the insertion of Norfolk seems aesthetically appealing with its specific lyricism and intonation patterns, and it gives the station a unique profile that seems appropriate to such a local service. The broadcasts represent a particular type of information (including lost shoes, birthday calls and the like) delivered in a specially localised form. It is both the content and the delivery that are identifying elements.

## Conclusion

A study of Norfolk Island radio service raises methodological issues for a media researcher. The discussion above provides detail of the radio service on a specific island. To what extent aspects of Radio Norfolk can be seen to be particular to this location and community (or communities) is worth exploring in a broader research project in which a thorough comparative analysis of contemporary island-based radio services can be undertaken.

The model offered by Radio Norfolk and its relation to community do not neatly fit into existing paradigms for the study of radio looking at regulation, programming and finance. Likewise, its role is not necessarily duplicated in the similar sized or formatted stations serving Pacific Island communities, media services that were widely studied in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>[15]</sup> In many ways, these issues relate to self-identity for Radio Norfolk. It may not identify as a community broadcaster in terms of its specific licence arrangement or code of practice. Nevertheless, given that it broadcasts by the community (with local voices, language and music), for the community (providing local news, information and entertainment) and with the community (participating in and

being integral to community life), Radio Norfolk communicates as a community radio station. In the era of podcasts and online radio services, to what extent this continues is yet to be explored. Furthermore, it is possible that the tensions between micro-local and Australian/global that operate in language uses, news policy and official scrutiny are a microcosm of Norfolk Island culture in general. As a single radio service responding to a multiplicity of needs and expectations, Radio Norfolk adopts a range of 'voices' and modes of address consistent with its island communities of interest.

## Endnotes

[1] The field research resulted in my report to the Norfolk Island Administration (Coyle, 2000).

[2] Such news coverage was observed at the time of the 2006 International Small Island Cultures Conference with the court appearance of the accused murderer of Janelle Patton. Television, radio and print journalists came to the island, and overseas based media services contacted islanders (especially radio and newspaper services) for information and comment.

[3] See Scannell (1996) on the appeal and meaning of the listening experience, and the role of public broadcasting.

[4] The categorisation of media services as exogenous and endogenous can be shown to be porous in relation to media content insofar as local media are informed by and include media from outside sources, and off-island media also draw on local media for information about island affairs, attitudes and opinions.

[5] In brief, certain laws and standards imposed from Australia affect Radio Norfolk (eg the Radiocommunications Act 1983 relating to frequencies, and the Copyright Act 1968).

[6] Peter Mühlhäusler notes: "There are significant differences in pronunciation and vocabulary between different families. At this point, there is no official standard spelling, lexicon and grammar" (email to the author 11/4/06).

[7] Members include Ron Nobbs, David Evans, former Broadcasting Officer Kathy Le Cren, former broadcaster Chloe Nicholson, and school representative P J Wilson.

[8] The Administration funds the salary of the Broadcasting Officer (station manager) and a modest budget for expenses, including payments to some of the on-air presenters.

[9] 'Community' broadcasting stations in Australia are usually largely volunteer-operated with income from a variety of sources, but not from direct advertising (see Forde et al., 2003). The major part of the income to public broadcasters comes directly through Treasury.

[10] Since 2003, programme slots have been decreased from four-hourly shifts to two hours. See programme guide available at <<http://www.norfolk.gov.nf/What's%20On%20radio.htm>>. See also Ricquish (1989) for more detail of radio operations in the 1980s.

[11] The station once included a considerable amount of programming from overseas sources such as the British Broadcasting Service (BBC) and Deutsch Welle, although with more programming available online, these subscriptions have been cut and outside programme material (such as from Radio Australia-Pacific) considerably reduced.

[12] This is not unique to the radio services: island newspapers tend to avoid confrontational or contentious items and issues. Peter Mühlhäusler argues that Norfolk Island features particular “rules of interaction, that discourage direct intervention” (email to the author 11/4/06).

[13] I have indicated approximate pronunciation of several words using generalised sound indicators rather than formalised diacriticals or phonetics. Several words are also pronounced with a specific vowel sound but are not indicated here. I have followed the spelling in Buffett (1999) for commonly used words. Where visitors are addressed, Darlene uses a generalised Australian-accented pronunciation that is distinct from the pronunciation of Norfolk styled words.

[14] See seminal radio training manuals such as McLeish (1974), which was later published as *Radio Production* in 1994.

[15] Such studies were effectively summarised in Wurm, Mühlhäusler and Tryon (1996). See also Seward (1999).

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