

# MY VOICE!' A STUDY OF SINHALA LANGUAGE ETHNIC RADIO PROGRAMS IN MELBOURNE

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## Abstract

This article presents findings from a small-scale study of Sinhala radio programs in Melbourne, Australia in serving the Sri Lankan community. The Australian government introduced ethnic radio programs to fulfill migrants' needs in their settlement in Australia. However, it has not reviewed their goals, and listeners' current interest in them, since initiating them in 1975. Therefore this study focuses on the present need for ethnic radio programs in Australia and on listeners' feedback about their content and presentation.

This study also reviews how ethnic radio programs have addressed the issues that had initially been identified as the reason for their introduction in 1975. The listeners state that the Sinhala radio programs do not help them to settle in Australia. The issue of participation is critical, and most of the participants complained that the same people have run the programs for a long time. Everyone unanimously agrees that ethnic radio programs play a big role within the community, which is completely neglected by mainstream media. This study has opened the doors for further study or development of a new model for ethnic listeners in Australia. A further in-depth study would identify the needs of the present listenership, which may lead to a broader listenership.

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## Introduction

Radio has supported people to make their life easier and more comfortable, especially when they are marginalized, such as migrants. Radio has contributed in different ways, protecting their cultures and helping to settle while promoting their hidden talents. Community radio has developed as an alternative to commercial and public broadcasting. People's participation is one of the key strengths of community radio in two ways, to develop the content as well as the management of radio stations. It is notable that all the contributors at community radio stations are volunteers, other than the few specialized people hired in their technical capacity. Community radio has acted as a social changer all over the world as it takes up community issues, and as a result, listeners feel it is a 'real voice' compared to commercial radio.

Some may argue that ethnic radio programs are no longer required, or that their role is different from before, and the current state of ethnic radio in Australia needs to be examined in depth for both practical and theoretical implications. This study focuses on Sinhala language (from Sri Lanka) ethnic community radio in Melbourne as a preliminary examination of this phenomenon because Sinhala speakers from Sri Lanka are a significantly large migrant group in Australia, and they are mostly domiciled in the greater Melbourne region.

The study examines listeners' views on Sinhala language ethnic radio programs broadcast in Melbourne; the content of the programs, especially in relation to settlement; the effect of social media and Internet; opportunities for Sri Lankans living in Melbourne to participate in their ethnic community radio programs; government funding, and contributions made by various stakeholders to restructure ethnic radio in Melbourne.

The research was based on a participatory analytical approach. In a social policy and decision-making context, the community broadcaster is considered as an intermediary between radio stations and community groups. The study employs a dual method of evaluation of ethnic radio programs. The approach incorporates listeners' feedback to identify their interests for program effectiveness in order to assess the ability of ethnic radio programs to fulfill migrants' needs. This approach comprises focus group discussions, interviews (in-depth, semi-structured and unstructured) and document analysis as research tools. After collection, the data was transcribed and analyzed.

The community radio sector in general is diverse and stations embody different organizing principles and operating values. Nevertheless, they tend to share some core features, such as not-for-profit status, locally-oriented and produced content, editorial independence, social mission, and the presence of volunteer and non-professional staff (Milan 2008, pp. 25-46). The most distinguishing characteristic of community radio is the commitment of, and participation by, the community at all levels. While commercial radio listeners are able to participate in the programming in limited ways – via open-line telephone shows or by requesting a favorite song, for example – community radio listeners are the producers,

managers, directors, evaluators and even the owners of their respective stations. On the other hand, community radio broadcasters are working to make the airwaves accessible and open, and to transform radio into a medium in the service of their communities (Girard 2001, p. 8).

Minister for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs M. J. R. Mackellar (1977), establishing ethnic radio in Australia, stated that “its purpose [is] to assist national groups to preserve their cultures in harmony with the total Australian community.” Mackellar also noted a steady decline in foreign-language content on established commercial and national radio channels, and a steady increase in the non-English speaking population in Australia due to increased migration from various Asian populations since the early 1970s. The initiative of ethnic radio programs became a political slogan of the Whitlam Government (1972-75), which claimed that they strengthened the migrant voice. Today, ethnic radio has become a unique and extensive network of locally produced programs providing vital support for Australia's diverse ethnic communities. A recent national survey by the National Ethnic and Multicultural Broadcasting Council (NEMBC) revealed that 2,439 hours of multilingual language programs are produced weekly, and broadcast in over 100 languages (2014).

In 1976, a joint cabinet submission made by M.J.R. Mackellar, Minister for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs, and E.L. Robinson, Minister of Post and Telecommunication, highlighted the urgency of a legislative amendment to establish a permanent structure for an ethnic broadcasting service to be incorporated in Australia. They argued that 1,400,000 people (or 10 percent of the Australian population on June 30, 1975) were born in non-English speaking countries. In addition, 1,000,000 children were born each year with one or two parents from a non-English speaking country (Mackellar and Robinson 1976).

Sinhala is the main language (74%) spoken in Sri Lanka (PRIU, 2008). According to the 2011 census in Australia, the main languages spoken at home by Sri Lanka-born people in Australia were Sinhala (40,926), English (23,112) and Tamil (19,854). Of the 63,301 Sri Lanka-born people who spoke a language other than English at home, 91.9 per cent spoke English very well or well, and 6.1 per cent spoke English not well or not at all (immi.gov.au, 2014). Sri Lankans have been settling in Victoria since the 19th century. They were first counted in the 1871 census, when 58 people were recorded. Like Sri Lankan settlers elsewhere in Australia, they probably immigrated as labourers or gold prospectors. The community began to increase after World War II. Sri Lanka gained independence from England in 1948, and many more Sri Lankan Burghers (an ethnic group of mixed Dutch, Portuguese Burghers and Sri Lankan descent) began to immigrate to English-speaking countries, including Australia (Museum Victoria, 2014). In the last five years, the majority, or more than 70 per cent, of migrants from Sri Lanka arrived under the skilled component of the Migration Program, with around 17 per cent under the Family component (immi.gov.au, 2014). According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2013), the populations of the overseas born Sri Lankans living in Australia are 99,700 and 50,400 of them live in Victoria. The Sri Lankan migration into Victoria is quite remarkable, being the fourth largest source of new migrants. In the last 5 years, Victoria has

become the new home of almost half (46%) of all the Sri Lankan migrants to Australia. This is likely to increase the population of Sri Lanka-born people of 31,000 in the last Census by about a third. Sri Lankan migration into Victoria is highly concentrated in Melbourne's southeast, including Greater Dandenong, Casey and Monash (Glenn, 2008). At the 2011 Census, 70.6 per cent of the Sri Lanka-born migrants aged 15 years and over had some form of higher non-school qualifications compared to 55.9 per cent of the Australian population. Of the 53,217 Sri Lanka-born who were employed, 51.3 per cent were employed in either a skilled managerial, professional or trade occupation. The corresponding rate in the total Australian population was 48.4 per cent (immi.gov.au, 2014).

Radio programs for Sri Lankans were introduced in 1979 at 3EA radio station in Melbourne and 2EA in Sydney in the English language, two years after the initiative to introduce ethnic radio programs in Australia. Vernon Abeysekara had presented the Sri Lankan program in Melbourne and he invited Dr. Karu Liyanaratchi (OAM) to present a three-minute segment in Sinhala language in the one-hour English language program. After a few months, the Sinhala language segment was extended for 15 minutes. When SBS started broadcasting Sinhala language radio programs, Dr. Liyanaratchi was appointed as the executive producer in 1985 (Karunaratne, 2014). In the meantime, Sinhala Cultural and Community Services Foundation (Inc.) Victoria was able to have two hours for Sri Lankans when 3ZZZ started broadcasting on a regular basis in June 1989. The Sinhala Cultural Foundation used this opportunity to promote their organization and with the help of the radio program they saved time and money, printing and sending Newsletters. In May 1997 Sinhala Cultural Foundation was able to get another hour for an English program for the benefit of Burghers, Muslims and older Sinhalese who are not fluent in Sinhalese (sccsf.net, 2014). At the same time, 3ZZZ had understood that it would be more beneficial broadcasting in English rather than in their native languages such as Sinhala or Tamil. However there was not much concerned about the content. The presenter's aim was to promote the language. According to Dr. Liyanaratchi, early days some Sinhala radio programs filled only with Sinhala book reading as they were unable to have news sources (2014). These kinds of background facts tell us how the ethnic radio evolved in Australia.

The research data for this study was collected from samples of listeners using 38 focus group interviews and 8 in-depth interviews, with a representative sample of other relevant stakeholders. These interviews aim to obtain participants' views and opinions of the current state of the radio programs and suggestions for improvement, in the context of new technologies that provide other sources of information and functions previously provided exclusively by community radio for the Sinhala-speaking migrant communities in Melbourne.

### **Theoretical perspectives**

Although ethnic radio programs in Australia have aired for more than 35 years, so far they have not been examined in depth to gauge if their main objectives have been achieved. Therefore, this study tries to find out how ethnic radio programs have been used by their

target audiences, and if and how they have benefited migrant settlement in Australia as originally intended. This study uses the Sri Lankan community and Sinhala language radio programs in Melbourne as an example.

As ethnic radio programs have not been reviewed after 1975, program presenters continue to follow the existing guidelines. Kalinga Seneviratne confirms this argument, suggesting that: “ethnic community radio contents could include news and current affairs - especially homeland news otherwise not available from other sources” (1993, p.10), which is debatable today due to the development and availability of social media and other electronic sources that fulfill listeners’ needs.

Taking a functionalist approach, this research examines 'how' Sinhala ethnic community radio is 'doing' in Melbourne, Australia. Ethnic radio programs are a sub-genre of community radio programming in general and as such, contemporary theoretical understandings of alternative media – and community radio specifically – are a logical and appropriate springboard for their theorization (Anderson 2011, pp.79-111).

According to the uses and gratification theory (Katz *et al.* 1973-1974, pp. 509-523), people use media to their own benefit in order to fulfill various individual needs and to obtain certain gratifications or personal satisfaction. It is generally assumed that ethnic radio program listeners expect their specific community radio and other media to help them retain the ‘sound’ memories left behind when they migrated overseas and to guarantee their community’s representation in the media in the host country, which is often neglected by its mainstream media. For example, ethnic listeners may be interested in listening to music from their home countries and wanting to know what is happening in their motherland. However, this can vary for different individuals based on their personal interests and circumstances. For example, a Sri Lankan migrant from 30 years ago may not always enjoy contemporary Sri Lankan music and a recent migrant may want to listen to current Sri Lankan music and not the ‘oldies’.

The uses and gratification theory further suggests that each individual has several needs that seek fulfillment. Therefore, various media compete with other sources to fulfill those needs and have created a wide range of choices to do so. For example, individual ethnic community radio listeners may be interested in only a few segments within a given radio program that contains a mix of music, local news, foreign news, current affairs etc. In addition to the radio, they may also have access to other sources providing the same information or content, such as telephone conversations with others living in either Australia or Sri Lanka, face-to-face, or online conversations with their personal contacts. Therefore, it is important to examine how listeners use ethnic radio within this mix of sources.

The uses and gratification theory indicates that individual audience members make decisions to receive specific media and their messages. In this sense, listeners add value to ethnic radio programs when they decide to listen to them. Ethnic radio programs are not addressing the

individual desires of each audience member. Ideally, radio programs should target each listener rather than the mass, as all listeners would like to feel personally addressed and catered to. Radio is a one-to-one relationship between the presenter/creator and the listener (Radio Presenting, 2009). However, when ethnic listeners are considered, the situation is more complicated because each listener and their 'back home experiences' are varied and often unique. In this situation the ethnic program presenter/ creator has to decide whom to address – the mass or each individual. My research endeavours to examine how various stakeholders of Sinhala language ethnic community radio programs in Melbourne think about the current offerings available to them and how well these offerings meet their uses and gratifications needs.

The research was based on a participatory analytical approach including listener feedback and document analysis to explore views on ethnic radio programs in Australia. The sample recruited (38 listeners and eight presenters) participated in focus group interviews. The data collected from the focus group participants was transcribed and analyzed. This research suggests that the listeners were selective in listening to ethnic radio programs based on broadcasting time, content, presentation and the coverage. The participants disagreed with the notion that the radio programs helped them to settle in Australia, which was one of the primary aims when ethnic programs were initiated. The participants were more interested in local information relevant to them. Everyone agreed that second generation involvement in ethnic radio programs was very important, though their participation was minimum due to their language proficiency.

The participants unanimously agreed that ethnic radio programs play a big role within the community, which is completely neglected by mainstream media. However, there is a need for an in-depth review of these programs and for more listener-friendly ethnic radio programs.

### **Methodology**

It is important to identify the most appropriate methods and theories to analyze the data collected from the radio listeners. Taking a functionalist approach, this research examined 'how' Sinhala language ethnic community radio is 'doing' in Melbourne, Australia. According to the uses and gratification theory (Katz *et al.* 1973-1974, pp. 509-523), people use media for their own benefit in order to fulfill various individual needs and obtain certain gratifications or personal satisfaction. It is generally assumed that ethnic radio program listeners expect their specific community radio and other media to help them retain the 'sound' memories they left behind when they migrated and to guarantee their community's representation in the host country, often neglected by its mainstream media. For example, ethnic listeners may be interested in listening to music from their home countries and wanting to know what is happening in their motherlands. However, this can vary based on individuals' personal interests and circumstances. For example, a Sri Lankan person who migrated 30 years ago

may not always enjoy contemporary Sri Lankan music, whereas a recent migrant may want to listen to current Sri Lankan music and not Sri Lankan 'oldies'.

The uses and gratification theory further states that each individual has several needs that seek fulfillment and they do so through various media and technologies. Therefore, different media today compete with each other to fulfill these needs by creating a wide range of choices for audience members. For example, an individual ethnic community radio listener may be interested in only a few segments within a given radio program that contains a mix of music, local news, foreign news, current affairs etc. In addition to radio, they may also have access to other sources providing the same information or content, such as telephone conversations with others living in either Australia or Sri Lanka, face-to-face interactions with community members or social media, using their personal contacts. Therefore, it is important to examine how listeners use ethnic radio within this mix of sources.

The uses and gratification theory indicates that individual audience members make decisions to receive specific media and their messages and therefore they place a value on the selected ones when they decide to do so. As ethnic radio programs are allocated for different migrant or language groups, they do not always address the individual desires of each audience member within each ethnic group. Ideally, radio programs should target each listener rather than the mass, as all listeners would like to feel personally addressed and catered to. Radio is sometimes described as a one-to-one relationship between the presenter/creator and the listener. However, when it is being presented to a wide and unknown audience of ethnic listeners, even if they belong to the same group, the situation is much more complicated because each listener and their 'back home experiences' are varied and often unique. In this situation the ethnic program presenter/creator has to decide whom to address – the mass or each individual. This research project examined how various stakeholders of Sinhala language ethnic community radio programs in Melbourne think about the current offerings available to them and how well these radio programs meet their uses and gratifications needs.

Another study of community radio was conducted in Canada, which showed how multicultural nature is reflected in broadcasting. Community radio in Canada is complex and very diverse, and the sector, perhaps through this complexity, plays an important role in the everyday maintenance of cultural traditions and diversity. There are a handful of ethnic radio stations in Canada operating under five different categories, which play an important role in migrants' everyday maintenance of cultural traditions and diversity. The ethnic radio programs in Canada are defined as follows:

- A program in a language other than French, English or native Canadian.
- A program in French or in English that is directed specifically to racially or culturally distinct groups whose first language is French or English.
- A program in French or in English that is directed specifically to any culturally or racially distinct group who have not retained the use of a third-language.

- A program using a bilingual mix that is directed specifically to any culturally or racially distinct group.
- A program in French or in English that is directed to any ethnic group or to a mainstream audience and that depicts Canada's cultural diversity through services those are multicultural, educational, informational, cross-cultural or intercultural in nature.

The Canadian government decided to lift the restriction on advertising in ethnic radio programs to overcome financial difficulties in 1994, which was criticized by some as it could lead to a commercial atmosphere rather than a community participation model (Price-Davies and Tacchi 2001, pp. 21- 23). However, this study does not discuss listener feedback or participation in ethnic radio programs and their content.

As a professional broadcaster in Sri Lanka and an ethnic broadcaster in Australia during the last two decades, I have personally experienced that audiences vary: although they belong to the same language group and born in the same place, their expectations as radio listeners are different. Some of the migrants have not been back to Sri Lanka for a substantial period. A scholar who returned to Sri Lanka after 19 years claims: "I found the country had undergone so much physical and cultural changes during the nineteen years I had been away. I felt like visiting a foreign country where I could speak the local language" (Kumar, D'Cruz, and Weerakkody 2009). This is a classic example of how migrants try to regain their memories: the author may prefer to see an unchanged environment back in her homeland, but a person who has grown up with these changes will not feel the same. Sri Lankan radio program listeners in Australia have a very similar experience. Although they can understand the language, information, music and rhythm shared in the program, it is somewhat removed from them. They prefer to relive sound memories; otherwise, they would feel that an irrelevant program is being broadcast over radio in a language they are fluent in. This is a challenge for the ethnic broadcaster who is addressing an audience with varied memories.

There is an argument within the community regarding the model of an ethnic radio program. I had the opportunity to present my own in 2012, after contributing to three Sinhala ethnic radio programs at three different Melbourne stations for 10 years continuously. I was conferred the "Best Sri Lankan Radio Presenter" award in 2007. When I started my Sinhala program at 3MDR radio station, I tried to change the content, audio presentation, recruitment of presenters, training, and management of the program, including financial handling. All these changes were introduced within the limits of the Australian ethnic radio program guidelines. It was a novel experience for the listeners as a community, and for the contributors of the program.

As a result of my efforts, the Sri Lankan Show at 3MDR- 97.1FM was awarded the People's Choice Award at the station presenters' annual award ceremony, and the "Ethnic Radio Program of the Year" award at the National Multicultural Broadcasting Council (NEMBC) annual conference, which is the most prestigious one in this sector. It was a remarkable performance as both the best and the most popular categories won within a year, which has not been achieved before by a Sri Lankan radio program in Australian broadcasting history. I



have proved the success of this model again by winning the ethnic radio program of the year award at the NEMBC annual conference in 2013. I have always believed that I am a member of my own community before being an ethnic radio presenter.

### Data Analysis

I have been professionally involved in broadcasting for the last 20 years and during that period I have experienced most aspects of the industry, practically as well as theoretically. Although I spent a few months collecting the data for this study, the research and the relevant sources were developed throughout my career.

Sinhala— the main language in Sri Lanka—is the 25th largest language group of 30 ethnic minorities in Victoria and is considered as one of the fastest growing groups of non-English languages among Victorians (VMC, 2013). 28,163 Victorians speak Sinhala at home, which is 2.3 percents of those who speak languages other than English (VMC 2012)(VMC 2012)(VMC 2012)(VMC 2012)(VMC 2012)(VMC 2012)(VMC 2012)(VMC, 2012)(VMC, 2012). Although they speak Sinhala at home, 60.7 percents of them speak English very well.

### Listening to radio

Even if a radio listener has accidentally tuned in to a program, the program content should have a value and a quality to hold his or her attention for a long time. When analysing the collected data from the focus groups it became clear that most of the participants have been listening to Sinhala radio programs for a long time. Two listeners started listening without knowing that Sinhala programs or ethnic programs existed. 11 of the participants had been listening to Sinhala radio programs for more than 20 years. “The content of the program motivates me to listen to the Sinhala program,” said a listener who had been enjoying the program for nine years. Some of them had been listening to the Sinhala programs continuously. Five participants said that if they missed the live program, they would catch up on the Internet archives.

Some listeners have a great enthusiasm for these programs. One of them explained his experience as follows:

*I have been living in Australia for the last 10 years and I have a habit of listening to Sinhala radio programs. Sometimes I set the alarm to wake up in time for the radio program after working until late. I organise my day according to the radio program. I switch on my mobile phone, two portable radio sets and car radio at the same time, which is set up to listen to the radio program I want. I do not want to miss any minute of the program while moving around the house.*

Aside from one participant, others were not interested to listen to all the Sinhala programs broadcast in Melbourne and they listen only to selected programs: “Some of the programs are not up to the standard and I am not interested to listen to them again,” explained a

participant.

### **Listener Interests**

People's interests change with time. This statement is applicable to long running radio programs and the program presenters have to consider it when developing program content. After analysing the research findings, listeners' interests emerged as follows:

- Protect the Sinhala language as it is dying in the Australian-Sri Lankan community
- Present more religious programs and bring back the heritage
- Play more music
- Play good music as it motivates me to listen to the same songs again
- Play old and classical music
- Need to discuss the local policy matters
- Need more professional presentation
- Produce programs for the next generation
- Not interested in political gossip in Sri Lanka.

Apart from these interests, the focus group participants assume that Sri Lankan radio programs in Melbourne have a social responsibility towards the community. In the meantime, we have to compare the current interests with the key goals of ethnic radio programs when they were introduced in Australia in 1975:

- To assist national groups to preserve their cultures in harmony with the total Australian community, and at the same time assist other Australians to appreciate those cultures and to encourage them to learn other languages
- Provide information and advice on their rights and responsibilities as residents of Australia and on other matters
- To help those who cannot speak English to settle speedily, happily and successfully
- Encourage and facilitate the learning of English
- Provide as adequately and equitably as possible for all ethnic groups including those which are numerically small
- Assist in promoting mutual understanding and harmony between and within ethnic groups and between ethnic groups and the English-speaking community
- Avoid political partisanship
- Avoid institutionalization of differences while maximizing the participation of ethnic groups and individuals in the operations of ethnic radio (Mackellar 1977, pp. 1-2).

Comparing Sinhala listeners' expectations with the initial aims, a clear change can be noted. As it has passed almost four decades the ethnic radio program presenters and the policy makers should understand the listeners interests and act to provide more listener friendly ethnic radio programs.

## Help with settlement

It is important to support people in their migration, which is unique to human beings. One of the key goals of establishing ethnic radio programs was helping migrants in their settlement, as evidenced in the above 1977 press release by Minister for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs M.J.R. Mackellar: "Provide information and advice on their rights and responsibilities of residence in Australia and on other matters; to assist the non-English-speaking migrant to settle speedily, happily and successfully". It is clear that the government wanted to support the migrants in their settlement with their own languages. The government might have taken that step after identifying migrants' English language fluency. Apart from that, migrants would have had to be comfortable when hearing their own language over the radio in their new homeland.

The focus group participants express mixed comments on this issue. In favour of the settlement support, they said Sinhala radio programs keep them updated with what is happening around them. The law changes regarding migration were one of their interests. The participants who believe the ethnic radio programs have not helped in their settlement said that they have online sources to gather information. Especially, the migrants who entered Australia as international students were much more familiar with Internet sources such as forums. A participant said he always found that the primary sources were more reliable.

## Participation

More participation strengthens the project of community radio and it should be opened to interested parties. However, two listeners said that the doors should be opened equally but at the same time, the broadcasters should have proper training. "They cannot practice by trial and error on air." On this issue, one radio program producer said:

*Every community radio station has a training program and interested parties should follow them first. Personally, I do not believe everyone can present the programs. I have dropped presenters who were not capable to go on air. Some of the community members were not happy with me. Because of it, they campaigned against me at the station's election and elected a person who supported them. I agree with the common argument that community radio is a volunteer place, and the door should be open for everyone; but although it is a volunteer job, not everyone gets a position at the fire brigade or the Salvation Army without proper training.*

Five participants noticed that participation in ethnic radio programs has declined, regarding the presentation and the donors at the annual radiothon programs, compared to the early 1990s. An increase in the number of Sinhala radio programs broadcasting in Melbourne could be a reason. Another issue they point out is that some of the radio stations have elections to appoint program committees. It has led to a division within the community. It has happened for the last two decades and some do not listen to the radio programs because they have issues with presenters. Analysing the Sri Lankan community, one participant complained: "Some Sri Lankans in Melbourne do not know whether there are Sinhala radio programs being

broadcast. Some are not interested. They have completely left Sri Lanka by migrating to Australia.”

Current Sinhala program producers in Melbourne have been performing for a long period. There is no indication of recent bouts of recruitment or opportunities for new faces. These presenters have given a few reasons for not introducing newcomers to their programs. According to them, some people are not interested in this industry as it is a volunteer job, some do not know enough about the community and its interests, and some did not seem interested to undergo training. At the same time, one presenter said he does not want to leave the program even if it meant an opportunity for another:

Another presenter has a similar comment on his participation:

*My wife and I started our program, and one day we would have to finish it. It is hard to replace either our presentation or the style. It is unique. My goal is to set a Guinness world record for presenting a radio program by husband and wife for the longest period. I always try to attract the next generation as well. I play covers of songs, which cater to them. Sometimes my son is involved in the program. One can argue that though he is my son, it is [an example of] the next generation's participation. The ethnic radio programs will remain in the future. I know some listeners who listen to Sinhala radio programs from Sri Lanka throughout the day. However, they do not miss my program. It proves how attached they are to local programs.*

His comments reflect the attitude of the ethnic radio program presenters' vision regarding the ethnic radio programs in Australia. They do not consider the community radio stations are partly funded by the government with the taxpayers' money and cannot use it as private property.

### **Content**

A broadcaster turned academic, Kalinga Seneviratne (1993, pp. 6-11), was critical of the ethnic radio program content in Australia:

*The audience penetration of 2EA and 3EA of most language communities are very high, even though the materials that go to air tend to be old fashioned, non-controversial, politically passive or downright repressive in terms of political debate. Although the radio program may have been sometimes boring and unstimulating, it nevertheless attracted audiences for its usefulness in providing settlement information, local, world and homeland news (usually from the big wire services) in their own language and for nostalgic reasons.*

In this study, participants' interest is more about local news or things happening around them. They like to listen to more localised news items and things that they can directly relate to their life style. For example, they prefer listening to small events in their local suburb, such as the development of a road, rather than a national story about Tasmania. Furthermore, they are more interested in the issues related to migrants such as dual citizenship than national policy changes like carbon tax.

### **Program format**

Radio program formats have developed and changed according to their audience. As Radio Station World explains, while introducing new formats radio programs have considered listeners' characteristics such as age, ethnicity, and background. Therefore, it is important to study the Sinhala radio program listenership in Melbourne while developing the formats for shows aimed to this community. At the same time, it is interesting to find out whether Sinhala radio program formats have developed as the listenership changed during the last two decades, and as the program format should help to attract more listeners. The presenters have mixed experiences of this issue. A presenter said: "I noticed similar segments in the commercial channels such as current affairs, news, discussions, and political stories. I followed the same."

### **Expectations**

It is important to understand listeners' interests through the Uses and Gratification theory, according to which a media user seeks out media sources that best fulfil, the needs of the user. Uses and gratifications theory assumes that the user has alternate choices to satisfy their needs (Katz et al. 1973-1974, pp. 509-524). Most of the participants said they are interested in new music and the latest information, which is important to their lives.

### **Broadcasting time**

Listeners are surrounded by different media sources and their day is full of things to do. Therefore, broadcast time is very important for them to prioritise their day-to-day workload, at work and at home. In other words, it is hard to find dedicated listeners for the radio programs as they have priorities to attend to. Therefore, more listeners can be attracted if the programs are broadcast at convenient times such as weekends.

Meanwhile, as ethnic radio programs are broadcast weekly, listeners have to wait for seven days to catch their program when online archives are not available. Even now, not every community radio station has on-line archives. Two focus group participants responded that the broadcasting time is not important as they can listen to the radio while attending to something else. However, they need a device such as a mobile phone or a computer to receive the live streaming. It is important to have the relevant knowledge to operate the receivers, as two participants said that computer-based technology is far from them, and they only listen to Sinhala programs via the radio.

### **Connect with the homeland**

Although migrants move to a new place, most of the time they do not erase their memories of the motherland. As Claire Dunne explained, radio plays a vital role to protect migrants' pond of memories regarding their homelands. Sri Lankan listeners in Melbourne further supported this, and how they have expanded their sources to connect with their homeland. The participants spoke of calling Sri Lanka over the phone or Skype, of instant and cheaper connections using social media such as Facebook or MSN; they said they used mobile applications such as Viber or Tango, watched Sri Lankan pay TV channels at home, and read

locally published Sri Lankan newspapers as well as Sri Lankan daily newspapers on the Internet and in hardcopy; these are all other sources to get connected with Sri Lanka. One participant has an Internet radio at home and they are listening to Sri Lankan channels throughout the day. As result of developments in technology, many migrants have enough opportunities to get connected with their homeland and keep up to date with their home. But in the early 1990s there was a demand for news segments in Sinhala radio programs. A listener explains:

*There was a big vacuum for a radio program in the Sri Lankan community in the '90s. Those days there was an insurgency in Sri Lanka and the Sri Lankans who lived in Australia were in a tense situation, as they did not know what was happening to relatives and friends back home. In addition, there was no media freedom in Sri Lanka and it was very hard to see the real picture. Now you cannot restrict anything as the development of information technology has eradicated those barriers and all the news are at your fingertips.*

### **Live streaming radio channels from Sri Lanka**

Live streaming became a popular tool among radio stations with the development of the technology. As Mary Jackson Pitts and Ross Harms (2003) said, it is an added advantage for the radio stations to reach more listeners who are located outside of their coverage. Andrea Baker (2010) supported this argument saying, users from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds tune in to radio online for a cultural connection (news, information, and music) to their homeland or motherland. Some Sri Lankan radio stations broadcast online to attract Sinhala speaking migrants, who are scattered all over the world. However, none of the participants were not interested listening to live streaming from Sri Lanka. A listener said: "It cannot fulfil our requirements. We have our own issues to discuss."

Another listener further supported this by saying:

*As I always connected with Sri Lanka using different sources, my interest is what happens here. Therefore, local program content is important for me. Live streaming radio programs do not address my local content requirements. They report all the happenings back in Sri Lanka. Although they all broadcast news, they are not relevant for me personally. I want to know only the national level news regarding Sri Lanka.*

The time difference is another issue. Local listeners have to spend a whole day listening to get information, as they do not know about radio program grids in Sri Lanka. A listener explained that those programs are created for 24-hour radio listeners. However, locally produced Sinhala programs are brief and filled with local information in 60- or 120-minute slots, which is very convenient for the listeners. Elderly listeners who are not familiar with technology, and traditional radio listeners like housewives who listen to the radio while cooking cannot get access to Internet-based live streaming. Irrelevant materials such as advertisements are another issue to distract from the live streaming. Although 40 percent of radio stations are broadcasting on-line (Jackson Pitts and Harms 2003, pp.270-282) the migrants are more

interested in locally produced ethnic programs, said the program presenters who participated in the research.

### Presenters

Radio presenters' job is always challenging as their resources are limited to their voice and they cannot feel the audience feedback instantly. Therefore, presenters should be highly talented to create pictures with the words. This is well explained by Bob Edwards and he points out that the failure of the broadcaster would lead to the listener being distracted. The focus group participants' overall comments about presenters or their presentations were negative: "They don't know how to present for the radio. They are not the right people to do the job and they are lacking talent as well," a listener commented. Another listener complained: "I find the presentation of the radio programs in Melbourne is substandard. They do not really cover the issues. Most of the time they read only the community announcements." This kind of feedback reveals listeners' frustration: "The quality of the ethnic radio programs is not up to the level. But I do not have a choice," a listener complained. At the same time the listeners expressed constructive criticism as well. For example, "Presenters can present community announcements in a way that is attractive to listeners rather than reading the notices which were sent by the organisations". The listeners understand the real situation and comment: "As they are volunteers the standards are very low. They need to be trained. The radiothon donations should allocate funds to train the presenters" they further added:

This can be analysed through the uses and gratification theory. Elihu Katz, Jay G. Blumler, and Michael Gurevitch's uses and gratification theory suggests that media users play an active role in choosing and using media (1973). It is important to understand the listeners' interests in depth to attract a broader listenership:

### Training for the presenters

The majority of Sinhala program producers have completed the basic induction training offered by 3ZZZ radio station, which was designed according to its requirements. Others developed the skills themselves. One presenter pointed out the value of updating the knowledge: "Radio is a media bound with technology. Therefore, it is important to update our knowledge. Apart from that I personally believe all the broadcasters should have ongoing training to upgrade their skills." Another two presenters commented about training of their fellow contributors. They explained:

*Sinhala program presenters' priorities are their life and family commitments. They want only to go on-air. Therefore, we cannot upgrade their knowledge without a commitment. Most radio program presenters want only a basic knowledge to cover their programs.*

Although Sinhala radio program presenters in Melbourne did not express their interest in training, other ethnic radio program presenters in Australia expressed a different view. According to a survey conducted by National Ethnic and Multicultural Broadcasting Council

(NEMBC), 71.9 percent of the participants said ethnic programs on regional or country stations should receive more support in training. Therefore it is a responsibility of the radio stations that broadcast Sinhala programs to inform their presenters on the importance of the training and encourage them to participate in training programs.

### **Broadcasting experience**

There is no doubt that if one wants to become a professional in a field, experience is necessary. According to the Australian Communications and Media Authority's (ACMA) Community Broadcasting Participation Guidelines (2010), presenters should have extensive experience in broadcasting. Most of the program presenters avoided answering the question and others said they never had any experience. Five participants were asked to present the program by the station as they had a close relationship with the management.

Two participants had joined as helpers to the programs and later started presenting their own programs. One presenter explains his experience:

*I was not interested in presenting a program or listening. But once I went to a radio station [Sinhala program] with my daughter, who had to sing a song. After observing the presenter on-air, I had a feeling that I could have done better. Then I approached another Sinhala program and started as a presenter.*

The program producers stated that it was important to give priority to the presenter's commitment rather than their talents or experience. As it is a volunteer role, commitment – such as weekly availability and being able to drive to the station – takes priority in a more commercial and busy life style. Five program producers indicated that it is difficult to manage experienced broadcasters.

### **Role of the ethnic radio program**

In 1975, Minister Mackellar wished “both migrants and Australians would benefit from the development of ethnic radio.” The ethnic radio program operating guidelines aimed “to assist national groups to preserve their cultures in harmony with the total Australian community, and at the same time assist other Australians to appreciate those cultures” (1977, p. 1).

Participants said ethnic radio programs play an important role in society. One listener explained his experience commenting on the Whitlam Government's policy:

*My mother passed away recently and an obituary notice was aired over the Sinhala radio program. Some of my friends called me after listening. I would not have had time to call them personally as I was busy with attending to the funeral. On the other hand, I have not had any other source to spread the news within a short time and without any cost.*

Another participant said: “Sinhala radio programs keep me updated about the law changes in Australia. It is very important to me as I am away from the Australian media”. At the same time, a listener explained how Sinhala radio program presenters had a privileged status in the society. Those presenters allegedly misused the power and the fame from ethnic radio



programs by giving opportunities to their mates and using airtime for their personal benefits. However, with the expansion of the programs and other media, the situation has changed.

### Feedback

Honest feedback may lead to a better performance. Therefore, Sinhala radio program presenters should have a mechanism to obtain feedback. According to Commercial Radio Australia's *Codes of Practice and Guidelines*, licensees welcome telephone comments from listeners, which they regard as valuable feedback on their service (2011). As Sinhala program presenters in Melbourne do not have a proper mechanism to get feedback regarding their programs, they depend on personal comments. One presenter said that he is not interested about the feedback, as he personally knows most members of the audience:

*I do not take comments made by people known to me seriously. They always appreciate me. However, if somebody unknown to me makes any remarks, it is very important for me. I show people that I am listening to them. I cannot do a program with everyone's ideas. When you are presenting a program, you cannot satisfy all the listeners.*

This comment emphasises that the presenter is not able to react to the listenership's feedback. The majority of them expressed their pleasure to get positive feedback as they are engaged in a volunteer role.

One presenter said: "If anybody is not happy with my program, they can switch it off, as I am presenting the program for my enjoyment." However, four presenters admitted to having reacted to listener feedback: "When I meet community groups they express their views. For example, Christians asked me to stop the weekly catholic message, as it is a waste of time. I acted according to their interests," said one presenter. Most of the presenters believe their listenership is interested in fun rather than in-depth issues. Sinhala program presenters in Melbourne felt that the listeners were enjoying their shows. They came to this conclusion, as there is no proper methodology to measure the value of their programs. It is understood that stations are too not interested to do feedback surveys or monitoring their programs, as commercial radio stations do. This is confirmed by 3ZZZ radio station:

*The programmes are not actively monitored or noticeably supervised. The station will only intervene if a formal complaint is received or if a particular programme has clearly breached the station's guidelines by, for example, exploiting commercial purposes or broadcasting offensive material (Cohen 2008).*

This has lead the presenters to do what they prefer without considering listener perspectives, which may result in a decrease in the number of people listening to the programs.

### The next generation

It is important to find out how we can include the next generation's contribution in ethnic radio program. It should be collaboration with the current program presenters rather than participation. Therefore, it is important to find out to what extent the next generation is given opportunities to perform in an ethnic radio program by the current authorities. One

participant who says supported this argument:

*I feel Sinhala program presenters in Melbourne are not giving many opportunities to the next generation to join as presenters. The kids who joined as presenters are not doing what they want. The conflict emerged, as Sinhala program presenters wanted the next generation to perform under their guidance and following their interests. For example, current program producers do not like to play the music, which is enjoyed by the youth.*

However the focus group participants unanimously agreed the next generation would not participate in Sinhala radio programs as presenters or listeners: “They are not interested in these programs; I cannot understand the reason. It could be the language barrier or that they are not interested to know about Sri Lanka,” one participant complained. Some participants said the language barrier is not an issue. The content and the issues talked about on the Sinhala radio programs are distant from them.

While youth, participation in Sinhala programs is low, according to the National Representative Bodies of the Community Broadcasting Sector,

*In many stations, young people are the driving influence in engagement and expansion into new technologies and opportunities. Through their involvement, young people communicate with each other and the wider community, developing key life skills. Formal links with schools and tertiary institutions are an important part of many stations’ activities. (CBAA 2010)*

Therefore, Sinhala program presenters and producers have to re-think their strategies to attract the next generation of the Sri Lankan community. For example, some ethnic language groups at 3ZZZ have tried to accommodate a younger generation of broadcasters into their programs within their programming section (Forde, Meadows, and Foxwell 2002).

## Future

When television was introduced, most people thought it would be the end of the radio. Instead, it added something to it. Radio started simulcast programs for listeners who could not watch television. In the same way, Internet should be viewed positively, as an added strength to radio. The focus group participants had a mix of ideas about the future of Sinhala radio programs in Australia.

*[Sinhala radio] cannot survive, as at the moment radio first generation migrants run programs. When they will leave from these programs, it will be hard to run the shows. The future of radio programs will be affected by changes in migration rules. For example if Australia will attract high-level professionals, they will not need these kinds of programs. They are well equipped with the resources to settle in Australia and are fluent in English.*

One participant argued: “Some languages remain for generations. Therefore, I assume Sinhala programs would remain in the future.” a listener predicted:

*Sinhala radio programs in Melbourne would remain only for another 10 years. The recent migrants do not want to listen to ethnic radio programs as they can listen to the radio via the*

*Internet. But the remaining listenership consisted older generation and the community societies who are checking whether their notices have aired.*

The researcher has attempted to find out the listeners' use of the radio medium, with the participation of 38 Sinhala radio program listeners from Sri Lanka living in Melbourne. The study has also collected the views of eight Sinhala radio program presenters in Melbourne as to whether they have identified listener requirements and interests. It is interesting that although three decades have gone by from the start of ethnic radio programs, there still is sufficient demand for them, as the listeners want to bring back their memories from the motherland, and addressed them with their mother tongue in a more professional manner, which could not be fulfilled by mainstream media or live radio streaming from Sri Lanka. Although this data collection is limited to one ethnic group, it opens avenues for further studies regarding other language groups and different migrant groups living in various parts of Australia.

### Conclusions

Although ethnic radio programming in Australia was initiated to fulfill a timely political promise in the 1970s, it has continued for almost four decades. During this period radio broadcasting has changed significantly with the development of technology, especially the introduction of the Internet and mobile applications.

Since the introduction of ethnic radio programs in Australia the sector has not reviewed its listenership or their requirements. Because of this oversight, broadcasters have continued assuming that listenership requirements remained the same as they were in 1975. Although the characteristics of the listenership have changed, this does not appear to have influenced the content of ethnic radio programs.

Ethnic radio programs are broadcast over community radio, which has its own identity compared to mainstream radio:

- It encourages audiences to participate in all aspects of the radio station including broadcasting and the management of the station;
- It serves a local community or a specific interest group;
- It encourages a wide range of people to be involved with the station regardless of their age, race, gender etc.;
- It places the quality and diversity of information provided ahead of slick programming styles;
- It encourages strengthening of the local culture with music, language, literature, debate etc.;
- It finds the programming content from local sources rather than national sources
- It is not-for-profit.

About 54 percent of the Australian population listens to community radio. Apart from listening to the radio, they contribute to the radio stations as advertisers, donors, or members.

Furthermore, some countries have identified radio as the most suitable media for marginalized groups such as migrants who are keen on maintaining their cultural identity, language and traditions. As a result of mainstream radio, a variety of minority ethnic communities have been neglected—in its failure to provide local news of interest to them or their activities, community radio has taken over the role of information provider in Australia. The listeners also feel listening to community radio is ‘real’ compared to mainstream radio. Ethnic radio programs also open doors to migrants who have practiced as broadcasters back in their homelands or studied media in Australia, but unfortunately cannot find an opportunity in Australian radio as they do not possess a ‘proper’ Australian accent. Ethnic radio programs also play a big role in broadcasting music: migrants would not have a chance to listen to music in their languages if there were no ethnic radio programs in Australia. Not only that: some of the migrants who produce songs in their own languages would never get a chance to broadcast other than in the ethnic programs.

The issues identified when ethnic radio program was initiated in 1975 are as follows:

- Assist national groups to preserve their cultures in harmony with the total Australian community, and at the same time to assist other Australians to appreciate those cultures and to encourage them to learn other languages
- Provide information and advice on the rights and responsibilities of residence in Australia and on other matters
- Help those who cannot speak English to settle speedily, happily and successfully
- Encourage and facilitate the learning of English
- Provide as adequately and equitably as possible for all ethnic groups including those which are numerically small
- Assist in promoting mutual understanding and harmony between and within ethnic groups and between ethnic groups and the English-speaking community
- Avoid political partisanship
- Avoid institutionalization of differences while maximizing the participation of ethnic groups and individuals in the operations of ethnic radio.

One of the main focuses of this study was to find out whether these issues are still valid. The study has found that the requirements of current ethnic radio listeners have changed and earlier goals were fulfilled by the development of information technology and proficiency in English.

This study was conducted to find out the present situation of ethnic radio programs in the Sinhala-speaking expat Sri Lankan community and related areas, with the participation of listeners and presenters. The study considered Sinhala radio programs broadcast in Melbourne and was conducted as focus group and individual interviews through volunteer

participation. Presently there are 10 Sinhala radio programs broadcast on different radio stations in Melbourne.

According to the findings;

- Ethnic radio was initiated as a community radio genre to fulfil migrant interests.
- The stations according to their demography identified ethnic languages.
- Program presenters and content developers are volunteers and broadcasting experience is not necessary to present a program.
- Training and updating industry knowledge is not compulsory.
- The stations or any other authority to assess whether or not they fulfil listener interests and industry guidelines did not review ethnic radio program content.
- The teams present some programs and others are by individuals.
- Most of the stations allow their presenters to continue for a long period without reviewing their programs or the performances. E.g. 25 years.
- Some programs have no specific format. Presenters do not have a clear idea about content development.
- Presenters do not have an idea about using e-communication or social media to promote their programs.
- It is very hard to get an opportunity as a presenter on an ethnic radio program.
- The second generation is completely neglected and as a result, they are distant from the ethnic radio programs. Their language proficiency is identified as the barrier.
- Listeners are not interested in listening to live streaming from their homelands. Listeners want only a briefing about their homeland rather than an in-depth analysis.
- They expect more local information and issues from the ethnic radio programs.

Meanwhile, the ethnic radio programs are competing with other community genres such as Joy FM or SBS who are also competing with the commercial or the mainstream radio channels. At the same time ethnic listeners have the advantage of listening to the live streaming from their homelands in their languages. Therefore the ethnic radio programs in Australia have to revamp the whole industry urgently. The main concerns should be:

- Identifying the listener interests to restructure the ethnic programs.
- Identifying the listener language requirements and presenting in appropriate languages, as some wanted to discuss their community issues in English rather than their native language.
- Giving more space for the ethnic groups' local issues and promoting their talents as

they are not getting much attention from the mainstream media.

- Identifying the individuals who have broadcasting experience rather than ethnic group representation. Therefore the stations need to keep an eye out for the capable individuals and recruit them when necessary.
- Open doors for the second-generation participation and allow them to present programs with a comfortable language for them and encourage them to discuss their own issues.
- Regular training in technology and content development. This could be organised at station level.
- Discuss with the ethnic groups and identify their needs.
- The ethnic language groups, which have the most needs, should be identified and more time should be allocated in order to cater their needs.

This study has opened the doors for further study or development of a new model for ethnic listeners in Australia. An in-depth study would identify the needs of the present listenership, which may lead to a broader listenership.

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