

Radio Quake: Broadcasting in Post-Quake Christchurch

1. Intro

This is a story about radio, but like everything in Christchurch now, it has to begin with the earthquake of September 4, 2010. We still obsessively recount our narratives of the quakes, and in this context it's appropriate to tell you mine. It starts the week before, when I was in Melbourne for a conference on utopia, dystopia and catastrophe. I gave a paper on my frivolous winter research project,

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which was the role of broadcasting in the zombie apocalypse, and specifically the way George Romero uses the point where television and radio turn to static to signify the end of civilisation. The zombie apocalypse was about the most realistic context for this inquiry that I could imagine at the time. I returned home at midnight on September 3rd, and 4 hours later, I was clinging to a doorway winding up my radio to see if Radio New Zealand National was still on air.

<slide: RNZ radio>

We all assumed the quake was centered in Wellington, which lies at the intersection of at least three faultlines, so I expected to find that symbolic radio silence. Instead, when I tuned in, the overnight host Vicky McCay was commenting that there was a wee shake in the studio, and wondered if it was a small quake further north. Over the hour that followed listeners around the south island texted in to describe their experiences, triangulating the biggest effects closest to Canterbury before the geonet drums revealed that this was a 7.1 on an unknown fault just outside Christchurch, New Zealand's second biggest city. That was a big deal, but it turns out that the violent moment of an earthquake merely sets the scene for a very long and slow and complicated disaster.

In retrospect, September, as we refer to it, wasn't that big a deal, but the 22nd of February changed everything. That was a 6.3 magnitude aftershock, basically right under the city, with the effect that now when we say 'the earthquake' that's the one we mean. It was only when I finally got in my car an hour later and heard the RNZ 2pm news that I realised what happened while I was clinging to the underside of my desk. Then I spent 4 hours driving home around endless diversions, passed by convoys of army trucks, while the radio told me what was going on inside the central city I could no longer get to (in fact, the cordon restricting access to the city was only lifted last weekend). My partner spent the afternoon standing at our gate winding that little radio as neighbours and dust covered people walking home from town gathered around to listen, try to understand what they were hearing, and start to tell their own stories.

Because power was out, and because it is immediate, technically efficient, accessible, intimate, and all of that, radio was the only source of knowledge about the earthquake for days for most of the people who experienced it. The three national networks used their news stations to explore the full range of scientific, political, and human implications of the event. These major broadcasters fulfilled a significant role, in being able to provide the crucial journalistic perspective on the aftermath, that day and possibly forever afterwards. They specifically addressed the Christchurch audience within the national, and via Radio New Zealand at least we felt as though we had experienced something real, because it was all the radio was talking about.

The national networks all lost their Christchurch offices and studios on Feb 22 - staff were evacuated and then kept out by the cordon, and all but one of their buildings has now been demolished.

<slide: RNZ house>

<slide: Newstalk house>

None of the national radio stations went off air, and they are all now ensconced in well appointed studios, with proper office spaces, albeit not necessarily permanent ones. The relocations were all organised by centralised head offices.

<slide: motels>

Radio New Zealand and the commercial TRN both spent most of 2011 broadcasting from motel rooms, before moving into single story office buildings on the edge of town. Mediaworks have been broadcasting from a horse racing track - first in their OB vans, but now in refitted entertainment suites. The locally based journalists and few announcers did important work in contributing the Christchurch voice to the national coverage, and they have faced huge challenges in their personal and professional lives, but the survival of the stations themselves was certainly never an issue.

Which brings me to the focus of my research, which is on the challenges faced by the few Christchurch based radio stations in maintaining operations after the earthquakes, and the processes they went through in order to resume or remain broadcasting. All Christchurch radio stations were forced to improvise new locations and styles of broadcasting, but the need to restore, or maintain, a full rolling broadcast signal, rested entirely on locally owned and staffed independent radio stations: student, Iwi, community access, and other small scale operations with very limited external support.

So over the past year and a half I've been interviewing the managers and other staff members of all of these radio stations, to trace their operational processes, and changes in programming, advertising, and audience relationships since the february quake. The experiences of different stations demonstrate the inequities of the New Zealand broadcasting system, and the structural challenges of maintaining a local radio station in a nationally networked environment. This research works through the role of local radio stations in the post-disaster city: as an essential node in a network of listeners, advertisers, staff, cultural institutions, and all kinds of other agencies and interests - in this context, civil defence and all the layers of new bureaucracy the earthquake generated. Local independent radio in Christchurch has mostly survived the aftermath, but the form of that survival depends on the different stations' license conditions, history, personal resources, and connection with the local.

<slide: station logos>

For today I want to give a quick summary of some of the project. I'm still processing the broader and more theoretical issues, so I'm just going to focus on the ways stations dealt with restoring transmission, and developing transitional studio facilities, working through a distinction between transmission and broadcasting, in which restoring a signal from the transmitter was easier to resolve than developing a new permanent mode of broadcasting.

Three of the independent stations were able to restore transmission quickly after the earthquake by plugging sound sources directly into their transmitters. Pulzar FM, a local

commercial dance station, and the student station RdU, both plugged laptops directly into their transmitters up in the hills, and ran radio broadcasts out of itunes playlists. Both stations ended up having content recorded in their production engineers' home studios, updating the playlists with voice breaks and prerecorded radio shows via USB sticks. Tahu Fm, the local Iwi, Maori, station returned to air via the satellite feeds of other stations in the Iwi Radio Network, by plugging a sky decoder directly into the transmitter. For the first few weeks they rebroadcast Te Upoko O Te Ika from Wellington, which directed its programming to Christchurch. Once Tahu had a temporary studio set up using equipment salvaged from their old studio, they were able to broadcast from 9-5, and then switch over to another Iwi station, Radio Ngati Porou, on the North Island's East Coast in the evenings.

Separating the act of transmission from broadcasting reveals a range of different issues.

<slide: Pulzar>

This was the Pulzar Studio,

<slide: view>, and the view immediately after the earthquake

the building housing Pulzar's studio survived the earthquake, and is still standing,

<slide: building>

but they are not allowed to return because of safety and insurance issues. Pulzar are tied to a very expensive license, and so needed to resume normal broadcasting as soon as possible, and subleased a studio space within a month. However, the combination of lost revenue from the vanished venues and bars that made up their ad schedule, and expensive monthly transmission charges, forced the station to close in November 2011. They returned to air a year later, so as to not forfeit the license, but the studio is now in the co-owner's home, so that a full roster of volunteer DJs run their shows from his living room.

<slide: Tahu building>

Tahu FM moved from the central city to a subdivision in the west, along with the rest of the Iwi governance and business interests.

<slide: wigram>

They resumed broadcasting through a series of portacoms in carparks, and now operate from a renovated suburban home.

<slide: studio>

<slide: volcano studio>

Lyttelton based Volcano Radio have a slightly different story of transmission and broadcast spaces, because they are the only independent station that remained on air in their own studio from the earthquake onwards. Volcano was / is a low-power station in the port town of Lyttelton. Despite being almost on top of the faultline, Volcano only lost power for a day. Being outside the inner city they were not cordoned out of their building, and were able to resume broadcasting via webstream on the 23rd, and using the transmitter on the 24th. Co owner Carmel Courtney describes the period after the quake as one in which the radio

became the community centre for the town - most of the main street was destroyed, including the cafes and community venues in which people would have naturally gathered. Instead, radios placed on street corners and around the essential mobile espresso cart were the community's major gathering place.

<slide: volcano building>

Volcano were able to continue broadcasting for several months while engineers debated the long term safety of their building. Like so many others in this well insured disaster, the central question was whether it was cheaper and easier to repair the building or just demolish it and start again. A magnitude 6 aftershock in June resolved that, and as the building emptied of other tenants Carmel and Simon felt they couldn't ask anyone else to risk being in the building, so they ran the station themselves on the archive of programmes that had been recorded over the previous 3 years in a long slow farewell to the station, which was finally wound down in August 2011.

<slide: demolition>

Carmel has spent the intervening years trying to work out how to revive a radio station that had a perfect studio.

<slide: house truck>

The current possibility is a house truck with a pot bellied stove, and a window, positioned just so, in order for the DJs to be able to see a sliver of sea between two buildings across the road. After some wrangling with the council, it seems like this version of Volcano Radio may be about to go live.

To finish, RDU is the station that has defined the possibilities of transitional studio space.

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<slide: rdu studio>

RDU had been based in the student union building of the University of Canterbury since 1976, but that building was deemed unsafe immediately after the earthquake. The co-directors James Meharry and Karyn South were able to rescue some equipment, and received a good insurance payout, so they had resources to continue, but were unwilling to commit to a lease and studio fitout. Rather than feeling tied down to another physical space, they wanted flexibility and mobility – as Karyn has said 'to be able to pick up our skirts and move if we had to' - and so ended up buying and renovating a Mitsubishi Canter horse truck.

<slide: studio>

<slide: band>

James lined the back of the truck with astroturf, and installed a full broadcast studio, with the capacity to run live to air of bands playing on the flip out side.

<slide: remove horse>

The station went 'live' from the RDU unit in July 2011, less than 6 months after losing the studio. RDU's rebirth in the horse truck is one of the now classic stories of resilience and

determination after the earthquakes, employing the mobility and flexibility that defines 'transitional' christchurch at its best. The station is now more visible and more closely connected to the wider community than it was in all the years tucked up in a corner of the UCSA building. And now, the station is better supported by old and new advertisers than ever before. James puts this down to the new sense of the local in the city, as local businesses deliberately support each other, and want to be seen to support other local success stories.

<slide: UC ad>

The most striking thing for me about all of these stations, is the fact that they have all kept going, often at great personal and financial cost to the owners and directors. There are a lot of open threads here, but perhaps the one I most want to emphasise is that while the well resources major networks were able to provide essential broadcast services after the earthquakes, it's the local independent stations that have had to work hardest to get back on air, in transmissison and broadcast. And those are the stations that operate most closely within the broader network of small local businesses, musicians, cultural events, and local audiences, so that their recovery is symbolic of the recovery of a broader network.