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A History of Community Broadcasting

Here is a rundown of the early history of Community Radio broadcasting in Australia. These are from a paper "The Social and Political forces that led to the Development of Public Radio in the 1960's", written by Dr. Jeff Langdon in 1995.

Introduction

This paper looks at the development of community radio in Australia in the sixties and seventies. This development created a third tier of broadcasting in Australia, adding to the national (ABC) and commercial networks. As such it was unique in the world.

Context

Before considering the disparate components that eventually congealed into the movement for access to the airwaves, it's necessary to understand the historical context.

Radio broadcasting as a social phenomenon developed in the years after World War One out of a technology that was initially developed primarily for site to site communication - wireless telegraphy.

We're celebrating this year the centenary of the first communication between one point and another in 1865 by Guillermo Marconi. Marconi, the son of a rich Italian father and Scottish mother, had the resources and the entrepreneurial flair to realize the commercial potential of wireless telegraphy. By the end of the century Marconi had set up a series of companies around the world which provided ship to shore communication. A celebrated incident in 1912 saw the SS Titanic use Marconi equipment to put out a distress call. A nearby ship was able to save some of the passengers.

It was David Sarnoff, an employee of the American arm of the Marconi empire - later called Radio Corporation of America (RCA) - that was the first to appreciate the potential of wireless telegraphy for mass communication; for entertainment and information, i.e. for radio broadcasting.

By the mid twenties radio stations were being introduced by the manufacturing industry throughout the world.

It's an important point to note that broadcasting was very much an industry-driven phenomenon rather than consumer-driven. The makers of the radio sets and the transmitters generally owned the radio stations and set the tone of the industry.

This was especially so in Australia, where AWA (formed in 1913 when Marconi and Telefunken merged) led industry lobbying of the newly established Federal Government to formulate the policy they wanted.

The other major player in the development of broadcasting in Australia was government. Government quickly realized that the broadcasting spectrum should be regulated, that the spectrum should remain in public ownership - like the roads and the water supply (until recently!).

These two factors - the manufacturing industry and government - controlled policy formulation in the formative years of broadcasting.

In the UK, government influence extended to the delivery of services with the nationalization of the radio stations themselves.

In the USA, the industry maintained control of stations where free enterprise led to privately-owned "commercial" stations being the model adopted.

In Australia the industry got the early break but by 1929 the government leant towards the UK model. It was too late to nationalize the whole industry, however, and Australia ended up with the "best of both worlds" parallel system of a national network alongside a commercial network.

And so it was. There was little community influence over the system. This remained the case right through until the sixties when four separate consumer-led movements developed which would end up changing the structure and delivery of broadcasting in this country.

These four were Frequency Modulation/ Fine Music, Ethnic Access, Educational Broadcasting and Community/Political Access.

(Aboriginal Broadcasting developed a bit later than the above but is now seen as an integral component of the community broadcasting movement. However it is not discussed in this paper other than to mention that the first Aboriginal language broadcasts occurred in Alice Springs in 1979 when an employee of the Northern Territory Education Department Chris Myefski approached a local Aboriginie, John Macumba, and together they talked the local commercial station 8HA into giving them half an hour per week. CAAMA was formed out of this initiative the next year.)

FM – Frequency Modulation/Fine Music

The extent of the influence that industry and government (the bureaucracy at least) had over policy development is demonstrated in the story of the introduction of FM broadcasting in Australia.

FM broadcasting was invented in the early thirties by David Armstrong in the USA. He in fact opened FM stations in America in 1939. By the start of World War Two there were 400,000 sets in use. The giant RCA Corporation led by Armstrong's nemesis David Sarnoff resisted FM. RCA lacked the critical patents to control the industry. It managed to delay the general introduction of FM by conning the regulators into changing the FM band from the 42-50 MHz band that Armstrong's services were using to the 88-108 MHz band we now use. This happened in 1945. Armstrong eventually committed suicide in despair.

In 1946 the PMG in Australia approved some experimental FM services in four capital cities using ABC programming.

In 1957 the Australian Broadcasting Control Board (precursor to the ABT) conducted an enquiry into the possible establishment of FM in Australia. It restricted its consultation to the industry and unsurprisingly found that there was no evidence of a need for FM in Australia!

In 1960 the same body dominated by engineers and bureaucrats from the industry recommended that the international FM band be utilized in Australia for television. The Huxley Commission in 1961 accepted this view and the government closed down the experimental FM services. Everyone expected that to be that.

However some consumers weren't satisfied. Dr. Neil Runcie and Murray Low at the University of NSW formed the Listeners Society of NSW in 1961 in order to lobby for the introduction of FM broadcasting.

In Melbourne that year Brian Cabena wrote to The Age calling for a similar lobby group to be formed in that city.

These early lobbyists wanted FM broadcasting introduced for its superior listening qualities - high fidelity, stereo and low interference. But also by establishing consumer-driven groups they moved the policy formulation debate for the first time into the public arena. They also wanted to see public input into the operation of new radio services.

That was the genesis of a push for community access to the airwaves.

By the late sixties there were Music Broadcasting Societies (MBS) established in both Melbourne and Sydney. Among these early pioneers were Peter Pockley, Michael Law, Max Keogh and Trevor Jarvie. They proposed the establishment of fine music FM stereo stations which would be run by and for the listeners. The listener-supported concept had had some success in the USA with the Pacifica stations and a few educational FM stations.

In the meantime the FM band had been partly taken over by television services (Channels 3, 4, 5, and 5A). The industry technocrats responded to the push for the introduction of FM by recommending that FM in Australia be introduced on a completely different band. This was another example of the manufacturing industry trying to set the policy agenda. If Australia alone in the world introduced FM on the UHF band rather than the VHF band, Australian radio set manufacturers (specifically AWA) would have had the game to themselves.

Incredibly the government bought this argument and in the dying days of the McMahon Liberal Government they agreed to introduce FM but on the wrong band.

Then the Whitlam Government came to power.
As with so many other areas of policy, the Whitlam government challenged the technocrats and bureaucrats. In subsequent enquiries the MBS Societies, assisted covertly by some key Whitlam-sympathetic bureaucrats, most importantly Geoff Evans, made mincemeat of the of ABCB engineers' arguments.

By 1974 sanity had prevailed and the government introduced FM on the internationally recognized VHF band. More importantly the notion of consumer control had also been established. The idea of broadcasting services that were run for and by the community - i.e. public broadcasting as it was called by then - had established a beach-head in policy development.

This, along with the antagonism that the industry, the commercial broadcasting industry especially, had for the new legislators, meant that FM in Australia was pioneered by public broadcasters. On 15th December 1974 2MBS-FM went to air.

It wasn't until 1976 that the ABC got onto FM. By the late seventies the commercial radio industry had realised its grave mistake and belatedly moved to get onto the FM band. In 1980 the first commercial FM services opened up but by then FM was dominated by public radio.

There are now 140 public (now called community) licences in Australia, the vast majority on the FM band. The ABC has ABC-FM, JJJ, some Radio National repeaters and some Second Regional Radio Services on FM. SBS has a national network on FM and there are about twenty commercial FM licences in metropolitan areas. Many more commercial FM services are now opening up in regional areas.

But the establishment and development of FM in Australia will always be seen as synonymous with the emergence of public broadcasting.

Ethnic Broadcasting
The second major campaign that sought to influence broadcasting policy in Australia can be broadly called "ethnic".

Australia imported large numbers of NESB immigrants after World War Two as cheap labour. By the sixties these people were reaching political and social maturity. They had bought houses in the suburbs, their kids were at state schools and they realised they had a political voice.

One of the questions that interested them was why the media in Australia still only reflected the anglo-celtic view of the world. One arm of the media slavishly copied the English imperialist BBC model whilst the other increasingly mimicked the American world view. Why was it not possible for some of the culture and information from their world to be expressed over the airwaves.

As with the introduction of FM this push came from a community perspective - a community of interest.

The commercial sector had provided some ethnic broadcasting in the fifties (usually for a fee) although the government had legislated to limit the amount of NESB broadcasting to 2.5% in 1952! Later this rule was relaxed and by 1964 stations like 2CH in Sydney and 3XY in Melbourne had considerable ethnic broadcasting.

However as commercial radio became more competitive and format-driven, the amount of ethnic broadcasting decreased until in 1972 there were only 36 hours in six languages of NESB broadcasting in the country.

And of course the ABC hardly recognised Australia as a cultural influence on its broadcasting policies; ethnic broadcasting was, and still is, anathema to the ABC.

So ethnic leaders too looked to the concept of a new public sector of broadcasting to satisfy their access needs.

In 1974 the Whitlam government's Media Department put forward a couple of proposals for establishing ethnic-only radio stations. In fact the officer who had the temerity to suggest this was, and is, Michael Thompson, current General Manager of the CBAA!

By March '75 ethnic community access programming had been accepted on Adelaide's education station 5UV and the government's Special Consultant on Ethnic Affairs Al Grassby had got approval to establish two temporary ethnic stations to be used for a limited time to promote and explain the government's new Medicare legislation to NESB communities.

These stations, 2EA and 3EA, were licensed to individuals and run initially largely by volunteers. They went to air in June '75. In fact Micheal Thompson was manager of these stations for a time.

In a related experiment the ABC was licensed in 1975 to run two experimental stations - 2JJ in Sydney as a youth music station and 3ZZ in Melbourne as an access station. Most of the access that occurred on 3ZZ throughout 1975 and '76 was ethnic so 3ZZ came to be seen as an ethnic access station.

Ethnic community groups in Brisbane and Adelaide emerged as part of the new push for community access stations. When 3ZZ was closed by the Fraser Government in 1977 the ethnic communities then switched to the push for a similar station in Melbourne.

After Fraser came to power in December '75 the EA experiments, initially operating as quasi-community stations, were offered to the ABC which typically dithered. Fraser lost patience and eventually the Special Broadcasting Service was established in November '77 as a statutory authority. Government involvement in ethnic broadcasting was entrenched.

The community push though was successful as part of the overall campaign for access and in 1979 4EB went to air. 5EBI followed shortly afterwards. Many other community stations now provide ethnic access programming. In fact the number of hours of ethnic community broadcasting is in excess of 800 hours per week around the country, far in excess of that provided by SBS's stations (and at a fraction of the cost).

In August 1989 3ZZZ finally got licensed and went to air - a daughter to 3ZZ twelve years after the original station's demise.

Educational Broadcasting

Ironically, of the four independent campaigns for access to the airwaves, the educational push bore the most fruit more quickly. Ironically, because this movement was, of the four, the least connected with the access and participation philosophies.

The idea of using radio as an extension to educational programs at University had been around since 1961 when VL-2UV at the University of NSW went 'on-air'. Technically 2UV wasn't a broadcasting station (being way off the broadcast band) and its programming was strictly didactic.

In the USA Universities and Colleges had been putting educational programs on the air since the early sixties. In Australia Armidale and ANU followed NSW's lead in the mid sixties with lower power 'stations' broadcasting to students.

At Adelaide the vision was a bit broader. The Adult Education Department had been trying to get funding to establish an educational station from 1966. It was only an anonymous grant of $100,000 in 1970 that spurred the University on. A certain amount of back door negotiation saw 5UV go to air in June 1972. At that stage 5UV wasn't significantly different from the other non-broadcast, didactic models but by 1974 when the MBS stations were 'licensed' 5UV was moving to the access and participation model that was to characterise public broadcasting. So June 28, 1972 is, somewhat erroneously, celebrated as the birthday of public broadcasting in Australia.

Community Access

The fourth movement striving to create a new style of broadcasting in Australia in the late sixties was characterised by the twin notions of access and participation. These came to be seen as the essential criteria that differentiates community/public broadcasting from the other two tiers.

As mentioned in the historical sketch at the beginning of this paper, broadcasting policy in Australia was led by industry and government imperatives. It was only in the sixties that the notion of the consumer or the broader community having a say started to be put forward.

The climate of political unrest in the late sixties was the perfect incubator for the community access cause. By way of example in 1971 students at Melbourne University set up a pirate radio station in the Union building and broadcast anti-government messages on the self styled '3DR' (Draft Resister). It was only on air for a few hours before Federal Police broke the barricades and confiscated the transmitting equipment. Hard to believe these days!

And in 1971 students in Brisbane were so concerned about biased and indifferent media coverage of the Springbok tour that they contemplated setting up a pirate station too. This group ultimately went on to form 4ZZZ. Jim Beatson currently working at the CBAA was intimately involved with the creation of 4ZZZ.

The advent of the Whitlam Government on 3rd December 1972 is seen as the spark that lit so many community-orientated ideas. This is a bit of a myth in the case of community radio as so much work had been done by all four movements by the end of 1972 that the introduction of public broadcasting was seen as inevitable. By June 1972, for instance, the ABCB's report on FM broadcasting had recommended the introduction of some form of public broadcasting.

In fact, although the Whitlam administration supported the introduction of public broadcasting and worked actively towards it, it was so antagonistic to the bureaucracy and so accident-prone that it's a miracle that public broadcasting emerged out the other end intact. A number of Senate Committees, Independent Commissions and Working Parties all revisited the basic philosophical question and redesigned models on its implementation.

To be fair to the Whitlam Government, the ABCB, still dominated by industry interests, was just as antagonistic back and it was only some clever backroom work by people like Geoff Evans that saved public broadcasting (and FM on the VHF band) in Australia.

By 1974 with a couple of elections already behind it and still with a hostile Senate, the government determined to introduce public licences using the Wireless & Telegraph Act. The MBS stations in Melbourne and Sydney were 'licensed' this way. 5UV's broadcasts were similarly legitimised.

There were active political groups in Melbourne (the Community Radio Federation and the Alternative Radio Association), Canberra and Sydney. These met in Canberra on 20th April 1974. About 80 people attended.

In July 1974 the Department held a seminar on the future of public broadcasting. They had an infamous secret Document J which set out this future even before the conference started. The existence of Document J was exposed in the newspaper the morning of the conference. It must have been a pretty tense meeting. The next day the proponents of public broadcasting met and established the CBAA.

The rest of 1974 was frenetic with lobbying, planning, submissions, meetings, as the various groups sought to get its particular vision of 'public broadcasting' into favour with the government. As with everything during the Whitlam years it was chaotic but exciting.

It's interesting to note in passing that in the same time frame twelve community access video centres were opened around the country with little of the machination and fighting that was occurring in community radio. Broadcasting licences weren't up for grabs there.

It was a very political and ideological struggle in Melbourne. In early 1975 when the ABC was granted a licence for an access station the Community Radio Federation attempted to establish the notion of true access but when it hit the ABC bureaucracy brick wall it withdrew and concentrated its efforts in promoting true community access stations.

As '75 rolled on the new Minister for the Media, Moss Cass, realised he was running out of time with the Whitlam Government struggled from crisis to crisis. He managed, against advice from the Attorney General's and PMG Departments, to get Cabinet approval for twelve licences. The original nineteen suggestions had had to be whittled down to twelve, each associated with a tertiary educational institution, in order to get the approval.

On 11th November Whitlam was sacked. The caretaker Fraser Government was bound by convention to implement existing policy. Cass had acted just in time. Even so the new Acting Minister for the Media, Peter Nixon, hesitated. It was only heavy lobbying by Robyn Mitchell at Bathurst CAE and Ivan Hincks at Lismore CAE, both in marginal Country Party seats, that convinced Nixon to sign the licence permits.

The dye was set and public broadcasting proceeded under the new Fraser Liberal Government. The original Cass Dozen, along with the pre-existing MBS stations, 5UV and 3CR (which had been licensed as a 'restricted' commercial station) were joined by other stations in the next few years.

It took until 1978 under the new Minister for Posts and Telecommunications, Tony Staley, before public broadcasting was put on a proper legislative framework.

Conclusion
Public broadcasting has grown spectacularly since 1978. There are now 140 licensed stations covering a range of specialist areas - education, ethnic, fine music, aboriginal, Christian, etc. as well as many geographic community stations which broadcast a diverse range of programming covering all of the above.

Issues
Amongst the many models for public broadcasting being tossed around in the early '70s one that was pushed by both interest groups and elements within the government, was for government funding of public stations. The more radical political groups such as the Community Radio Federation saw this as just one more control mechanism that government could exert on community radio. But also expediency saw the initial proponents of public broadcasting perhaps too readily accept a final model that precluded both government support and advertising as means of funding public broadcasting. As a consequence some assert that public broadcasting has never realised its potential. So much creative energy is used in surviving and so little on good broadcasting.

The notion of access too is problematic. Whilst it's politically correct to give all comers within your community of interest access to the airwaves, it doesn't always make for effective broadcasting. To be effective, broadcasting must convey a message clearly. And it must reach significant numbers of listeners. Unfortunately, people's listening habits have been 'educated' over the past fifty years to the point that they don't actively seek out interesting and entertaining 'programs' any more (as they would with television). They seek out like-minded stations. As a result much of the information being conveyed by community radio stations is reaching only a small clique of converts. If the aim of the exercise is to change people's views through education and information public broadcasting is sadly failing.

In the sixties the nascent public broadcasting movement was at the forefront of technological policy development. It was instrumental in getting FM stereo broadcasting introduced into Australia. Thirty years later technology is changing more quickly than it can be assimilated. The community sector is no longer part of the policy debate on issues such as digital audio, multimedia, cable systems, etc. Because of the convergence of technologies and the increasing dominance of the sector by fewer and bigger media companies, the future for community broadcasting is problematic.

Chronology of the Birth of Public/Community Radio in Australia

- 1961 - University of NSW licensed to broadcast, under the Wireless Telegraphy Act, postgraduate education courses, with no music, just off the AM band on VL2UV. First non-commercial, non-ABC radio station in Australia.
- 1962 - RMIT Campus station 3ST, run by students and funded by Union & SRC. This station did not need a licence because it was on cable only at the campus.
- 1965 - Radio Disc Jockey (RDJ) was set up, originally to make tapes of music to be played in Old People's Homes, but when one of the group had a brother conscripted to fight in the Vietnam War the group changed its plans and sent taped programmes to cheer up the troops fighting in Vietnam. This group later started Sydney suburban station 2RDJ-FM.
- April 1970 - Radio UNE Campus Radio Armidale, by SRC on a closed circuit. This station did not need a licence because it was on cable only at the campus.
- 1971 - 3DR Radio Draft Resister set up at Melbourne Uni. but ILLEGAL. This station was jammed by the government and removed because it was broadcasting on the air-waves without a licence. (The government also didn't like its programming but that was not the legal reason for getting rid of the station.)
- 1971 - 3PR People's Radio set up at Monash Uni. but ILLEGAL. This station was jammed by the government and removed because it was broadcasting on the air-waves without a licence. (The government also didn't like its programming but that was not the legal reason for getting rid of the station.)
- June, 1972 - University of Adelaide Department of Continuing Education commenced broadcasting (licence originally granted in 1970) under the Wireless Telegraphy Act, continuing education material, restricted to 12 hours per week with no music, just off the AM band on VL5UV. Both Jim Warburton, head of the Department of Continuing Education and Keith Conlon, the manager of VL5UV wanted to expand the station's programming to something more akin to public/community broadcasting, but they were not licensed to do so. Dr Gunn, a South Australian MP even asked in Parliament why the station should not be expanded to be allowed to play music. However, until the approval was given for some of the restrictions to be lifted, it could not really be described as a public/community broadcaster. It did not have community access or ethnic programs.
- October, 1972 - The government accepted the principle of public/community broadcasting in parliament, when it accepted the 'Red Report' prepared by the Australian Broadcasting Control Board. The Broadcasting and Television Act did not cater for this innovation so no stations could be established.
- 1 December, 1973 - The Salvation Army in Coffs Harbour commenced broadcasting, having received approval for a subscription cable radio station (which did not need to comply with the Broadcasting and Television Act), Dynamic Radio CHY, which was licensed to give high school students the experience of producing community programming, both for the benefit of the students as an activity and also to provide a much needed local service for Coffs Harbour, where there had previously been no radio Now we are accepting a 'technology neutral' approach to the sector, it is

about time that CHY was acknowledged as the first to produce legal community programming. This service was so popular, since it was the only service in Coffs Harbour, that their sponsorship announcements were fully booked up.

- 23 September, 1974 - Cabinet gave approval for the first experimental FM licences under the Wireless Telegraphy Act, with restrictions, for fine music stations, 2MBS-FM and 3MBS-FM in Sydney and Melbourne. At the same time it gave approval for VL5UV to be moved onto the AM band, renamed 5UV, and given a licence under the Wireless Telegraphy Act with restrictions similar to those of 2MBS-FM and 3MBS-FM, when the licence was renewed in February, 1975.
- 15 December, 1974 - 2MBS-FM started broadcasting as a fine music station, at noon from Alexander St, Crows Nest. It was the first FM public broadcasting station in Australia. 3MBS-FM experienced some technical difficulties and did not commence until July, 1975.
- February, 1975 - VL5UV transferred to the AM band, was renamed 5UV and was allowed to broadcast community programming.
- 3 March, 1975 - The Adelaide Ethnic Broadcasters Incorporated (EBI) was formed and started broadcasting ethnic programs firstly in Dutch and Italian, on 5UV, the same month. All previous foreign language broadcasts had been on commercial stations.

Although still at an experimental level, with no proper legislation to issue legitimate public broadcasting licences (which were not to be issued until 1979, after Minister Tony Staley's famous speech on public broadcasting guidelines 5 April, 1978) the third sector of broadcasting, public/community broadcasting, was now launched.

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