

The community broadcasting sector's codes of practice came into force on 1 January 1996. *ABA Update* talks to **Christina Alvarez**, Membership Services Officer (Radio), Community Broadcasting Association of Australia, about developing the codes and what they mean for community broadcasters.



Codes of practice for community broadcasting

What are the main features of the codes?

The codes go above and beyond the former Australian Broadcasting Tribunal (ABT) program standards. They are tailor-made to define both for ourselves within the community sector and the general public, what we're on about, our aims, our principles and our underlying philosophy of what it is to be a community broadcaster.

What is included in that philosophy?

The founding principles are outlined in Code 1. These include critical issues such as the importance of independence and autonomy as a media outlet. Other features include: to provide and expand a variety of viewpoints broadcast in Australia; to enhance the diversity of program choice available to the general public; and to use the media to

challenge stereotypes and break down prejudice and discrimination within programming content. These are some key philosophical aims that are stated within our codes of practice.

How were the codes developed?

The Broadcasting Services Act was passed late in 1992 and with that came the requirement to develop sector wide codes of practice. At that time, the CBAA (then the Public Broadcasting Association of Australia) was experiencing financial troubles and one of our affiliate organisations, the Western Australian Community Broadcasting Association, took on the challenge of developing the codes at a time when the CBAA was focussed on financial imperatives. The sector owes its gratitude to the Western Australian group for developing the codes of practice as we know them today. I think it's an excellent example of how community broadcasters pull together in a co-operative effort in difficult times.

That was in 1993. By 1994 the CBAA was firmly back on its feet, and the Western Australian group handed on the documents for development at the national level. In April, the ABA approved our final draft. In June that year it was distributed to the sector and we received favourable feedback from community broadcasters. We followed that up with a public campaign which ran for two weeks: each station around the country broadcast 30 spots each week, requesting feedback. The CBAA received only five responses to that request, and none of the respondents criticised the codes per se. We prepared our final submission to the ABA in September 1994 and in December the then ABA chairman Brian





Johns announced the codes would take effect on 1 January 1995.

We thought that was the end of the process, but then there was a hiccup. Although we had the percentage of approval we needed from the general community broadcasting sector, when you add the BRACS stations [Broadcasting for Remote Aboriginal Community Services], the figures didn't add up to the required 51 per cent approval rate. That led to the development of a specific indigenous and radio for print handicapped addenda to the codes.

Our general community radio stations adhered to the unratified codes on a voluntary basis during 1995, and in January 1996 the codes with the addenda were formally ratified.

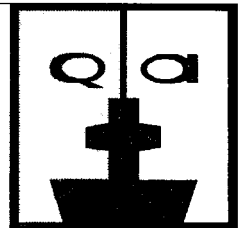
community participation.

We have specific codes which I think go above and beyond the commercial codes when it comes to Australian music content. The Broadcasting Services Act outlines that community broadcasters will carry sponsorship instead of advertising, so we've developed a code addressing that area. We state that sponsorship will not be a factor in determining access to broadcast time or the content or style of programs.

We have a code on volunteers because we are largely run by volunteers. The average radio station would have one staff member and about one hundred volunteers, so we've got a code specifically for them.

Conflict resolution is also a big issue. We're a

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The community broadcasting sector encompasses a diverse range of services and interests. How are these accommodated in the codes?

It's the interpretation of the codes which, I suppose, provides room for the accommodation of the diverse nature of the sector. The space between the stated philosophy and the practical application can be very accommodating! That's where some tension lies within our sector, but I think it's also true to say that similar tension exists in every sector of broadcasting.

How do you live up to your Code of Practice, which is a very challenging document, when it comes to the practical application? The CBAA would support the position that, although we're in a self-regulatory environment, the ABA must take a strong regulatory role in ensuring that stations do adhere to the codes, or at least act when a code is being breached within a station.

What kind of particular concerns might apply to the community broadcasting sector, which don't apply to the commercial sector, when developing a code of practice?

I'm not really familiar with the commercial codes so I can't really comment on them, but community broadcasters provide for active

community organisation and within the diversity of the community, you're going to find conflict. In commercial radio, if an employee is not performing, they may not have their job much longer. In community broadcasting, it's not as simple as that as we are mainly dealing with volunteer contributions. There are a number of appeal and mediation facilitation processes we've written into the codes to try to reach the win-win scenario, rather than the win-lose.

Is the CBAA itself going to be having a look at some of these processes? For example, in your conflict resolution code, you say that the licensees will have mechanisms which will facilitate conflict resolution within their organisation.

Yes. In fact as we speak the CBAA is working on a conflict resolution kit which will provide a brief overview of basic conflict resolution skills in order to address a conflict situation within a station. There are internal mechanisms which can be adopted to knock some tension on the head before it gets unmanageable. If it gets out of control, there are external agencies, such as the community justice centres, that will take on arbitration and facilitation roles.

For more information or for copies of the codes, contact the CBAA, ph (02) 310 2999.





Does the same principle operate for the code for volunteers? Are you providing advice on that code as well or is it up to each organisation?

The CBAA provides advice. We have paperwork from stations that have already developed some 'volunteer rights and responsibilities' guidelines. These stations have allowed the CBAA to distribute the information to other stations. After the CBAA completes the conflict resolution kit, we plan to develop a similar kit for the code on volunteers.

What new responsibilities does this self-regulation place on community radio stations?

Self-regulation has resulted in more discussion and negotiation at the station level. It's

requiring stations to think through their own position on issues. Take, for example, the issue of swearing and musical lyrics. Under the old program standards, the 'obscenity' clause allowed station management to respond, 'No swearing. It's not on'. But under our codes of practice there is a little bit more room for a community to interpret their own position.

Under the codes we have the statement that the station will be sensitive to community needs, but on the other hand, that the station will avoid censorship wherever possible. So, whereas before there was a very clear 'dos and don'ts' list, we now have a negotiation process that's been introduced at the station level. It's a fascinating process. It makes people fight for what they believe in. Debate is encouraged within the station, good healthy debate and hopefully a resolution that everybody feels a little bit more comfortable with, as they've had their say.

CBAA codes of practice

The ABA registered the CBAA codes of practice on 18 December 1995 and they came into effect on 1 January 1996. The ABA was satisfied that the code complied with the three mandatory criteria for registration: that is, the code provides appropriate community safeguards; it has been endorsed by a majority of community radio broadcasters; and members of the public have been given an adequate opportunity to comment on the code.

The codes are divided into eight sections, covering: responsibilities of broadcasting to the community; principles of diversity and independence; general programming guidelines and guidelines for news and current affairs programs; Australian music content; sponsorship; volunteers; conflict resolution; handling complaints; and review of codes.

The codes also contain an addendum specifically relating to the former BRACS services and an addendum containing special provisions for Radio for the Print Handicapped Services.

The codes of practice include a number of initiatives not required by legislation. They relate to the rights and responsibilities of volunteer staff and the broadcast of Australian music.

Under the *Broadcasting Services Act 1992*, broadcasters themselves are to develop codes of practice relating to programming matters and complaints procedures. These codes, when registered, replace the relevant ABA program standards.

The program standards carried over by the ABA from its predecessor, the ABT, for a two year transitional period ceased to be in force on 5 October 1994. However, the ABA made a determination to continue these standards for community radio services in order to maintain the existing safety net of content regulation until relevant codes of practice came into effect.

The CBAA undertook a public consultation process in developing the codes which involved a schedule of on-air announcements by all member stations over the period 15 to 26 August 1994. Members of the public who responded to these announcements were provided with draft copies of the codes.

What about the complaints handling process?

The complaint still comes to the station in the first instance. The complainant then follows up with the ABA if they're not satisfied.

Are there any other points about the codes you wanted to make?

I think the codes are a really important document for educational purposes. In the past community broadcasters were pointed to several documents for information about the sector: the *Broadcasting Act 1942*, the ABT program standards, the CBAA Code of Ethics and station policies. The codes of practice are far less intimidating — it's great to have just one document that gives people a snapshot view of the sector.

They have been welcomed by the industry?

Yes. I think there's sector-wide pride in our codes, they're taken very seriously. The CBAA receives several calls a week regarding various aspects of the codes. There's outcry about stations who've been perceived as breaching the codes and requests for action. When the sector first realised the amount of work involved in developing the codes I think there was a little bit of hesitancy from our resource-poor sector. At the end of the whole process, and again thanks to the Western Australian group, it's been a very binding, unifying experience, in my opinion.