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Paul Mason, Community Broadcasting Association of Australia, addressed the ABA's conference, Radio, Television and the New Media, in Canberra on 3 May. This is an edited version of that speech.

# Australian music on community radio

The impetus for this paper comes from a number of recent comments which suggest that there may be a revisiting of the issue of local content regulations for broadcasters.

Last year, the Productivity Commission, in their report into broadcasting, suggested that,

the current system of Australian content regulation is likely to become unsustainable as a means of addressing the social and cultural objectives of broadcasting.

More recently the Minister for Trade, Mark Vaile nominated local content rules, along with changes to intellectual property and foreign investment rules, as being potential bargaining chips in negotiating a bilateral trade deal with the USA for the purpose of gaining access to the US agricultural markets.

While such comments generally refer to television, there are inevitably implications for Australian music content regulation on radio.

Traditionally, public debate about Australian music content on radio has largely focused on commercial radio and the

specific amount of Australian music it is required to play. This usually results in an argument about the value of 20 per cent versus 30 per cent and so on.

Limiting the debate in this way has a number of important implications.

Firstly, given the priorities of commercial radio stations, it functionally limits the definition of 'Australian music' to commercial pop music. Yet despite its substantial profitability, commercial pop music is not the only sort of music that is of interest to, or is made by, Australians.

Secondly, it usually implies that the primary objective of local content regulation is to assist the producers of Australian music to gain greater access to the markets that can be delivered by commercial radio.

Framing the debate in these terms limits understanding of the role of Australian content regulation to one of industry assistance. While industry assistance may well be important, it would appear that in the current policy context, if local content regulations can only be justified in these

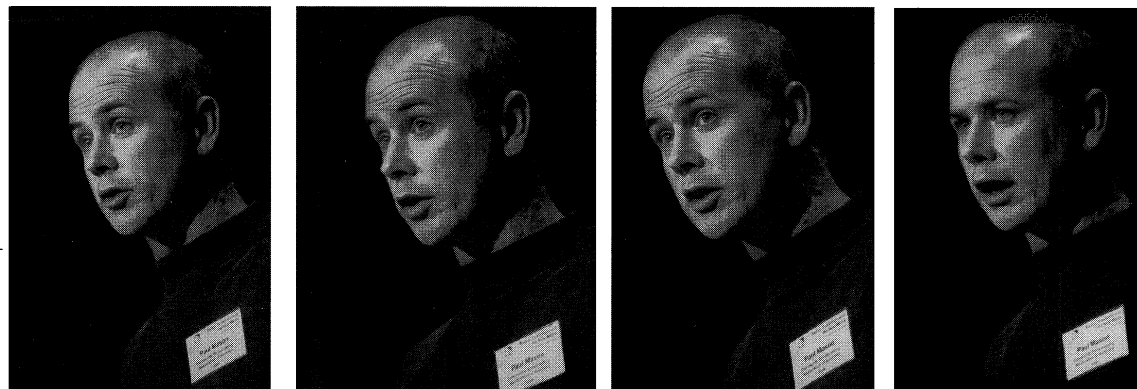
terms, then their future may be compromised.

This was clearly addressed by the Productivity Commission:

In the absence of demonstrated social, cultural or other benefits, industry assistance alone cannot justify the maintenance of content quota regulations. If they are imposed as industry assistance measures rather than for social and cultural purposes, content quotas are contrary to contemporary Australian industry and competition policy. (Productivity Commission 2000:415)

Obviously, local content regulations for radio are a vital means of creating both a healthy musical culture and a healthy music industry. As such however, they are basically a mechanism to achieve an agreed set of outcomes. Given the direction that the policy debate appears to be heading, it may be necessary to clarify what those outcomes are and re-state the significance of the social and cultural benefits.

While community radio has traditionally been perceived as providing opportunities both for the development of new



Paul Mason, left, delivering this address to the ABA Conference, Radio Television and New Media, on 3 May, Canberra

music and the ongoing exposure of music outside the international pop and rock formats that are the staple of commercial music radio, there has been little specific analysis of the music programming of community radio and its impact on audience development for Australian music.

### **Australian Music Radio Airplay Project**

The role of community radio in Australian music culture has recently been acknowledged through the establishment of the Australian Music Radio Airplay Project (AMRAP). Funded by the Federal Government, through the Community Broadcasting Foundation, this project is working with broadcasting and music industry stakeholders to develop sector wide strategies and infrastructure support to resource community radio's ongoing commitment to Australian music.

Utilising research undertaken as part of the development of AMRAP this paper will examine the music programming of the community broadcasting sector with specific reference to the sector's responsiveness to the musical interests of the community and the effect of the community broadcasting code of practice for Australian content.

The Community Broadcasting Code of Practice acknowledges that although the Broadcasting Services Act does not require community broadcasters to maintain minimum content levels of Australian music

given the nature of the community broadcasting sector and its commitment to reflecting the diversity of Australian culture and the interests of local communities, it is crucial for a significant proportion of Australian music, including indigenous Australian music, to be broadcast by community stations.

The community code of practice stipulates a minimum 20 per cent Australian content. This applies to 95 per cent of all stations regardless of their format. The five per cent excepted are ethnic language stations and classical music stations, which have a minimum of 10 per cent.

The majority of stations covered by the 20 per cent standard, broadcast what are referred to as 'diverse' or 'generalist' formats.

This is the traditional notion of community broadcasting, where in any one week you may hear enthusiasts present a punk program, while others present a jazz show, or a country show and so on.

Research into the programming of community radio reveals a preliminary list of around 15 separate genres of music — and endless sub genres — that are broadcast around Australia.

Remembering that these are programs presented by enthusiastic volunteers who get to choose the music they play the extent of this list gives us some insight

*'The application of a 20 per cent Australian content quota ... allows for the exposure and development of music that is of interest to Australian communities regardless of its commercial viability'*

into the breadth of musical interest within Australian communities.

The diversity of music represented on community broadcasting is driven therefore by an actual community interest — if no-one wanted to do a heavy metal program in Nowra for example there simply wouldn't be one. As it happens there are quite a few heavy metal programs — as well as country music, world and Christian programs — broadcast on 2UUU in Nowra.

The application of a 20 per cent Australian content quota across the majority of stations also ensures that these specialist music programs retain a connection with local musicians who make that particular sort of music.

Although this may have some commercial implications — particularly in terms of audience development for new artists — the primary impetus is a community rather than commercial interest. What this allows for is the exposure and development of music that is of interest to Australian communities regardless of its commercial viability. Which is not to rule out the benefits for an artist that can flow from community radio exposure, particu-

larly when they're the only station that will play your music.

Logically the community imperatives of not for profit community radio stations cannot apply for commercial broadcasters.

An analysis of the different approaches to the broadcast of jazz, between commercial and community broadcasters, illustrates this point.

Around 75 per cent of generalist community stations regularly broadcast jazz music, ranging from a minimum of three hours per week, to a station such as Sydney sub metro 2RES which broadcasts predominantly jazz. This makes jazz the second most broadcast type of music on community radio, Country Music being the most broadcast.

### **Jazz: community vs commercial**

That this is reflective of an actual community interest is reinforced by attendances at live events such as Sydney's Jazz in the Park and Manly Jazz Festivals as well as the numerous regional jazz festivals; furthermore jazz is taught to young musicians at both secondary and tertiary level; and finally there are a number of publicly funded Jazz Development Offices around Australia which present and promote jazz events featuring local musicians.

By comparison to the relatively high priority accorded jazz in the community broadcasting sector, evidence would suggest that jazz is accorded the lowest priority in commercial broadcasting terms.

The commercial broadcasting code of practice nominates a sliding scale of minimum Australian content percentages based on the predominant format of stations. At the top of this scale is Rock and Popular music that has a quota of 25 per cent. At the bottom of this scale is jazz with a quota of five per cent.

The justification for the sliding scale is a determination of the availability of appropriate music for the format. Evidence of this available material is based on surveys of cd releases by commercial record companies. The commercial radio code of practice therefore suggests that there are only a sufficient number of Australian jazz releases to justify a five per cent content quota.

Clearly, the implication of this comparison is that while jazz may be of interest at a community level, it is not a particularly viable interest for a commercial record company. More broadly it can be observed that the social and cultural interests of communities do not always offer great opportunities for commercial exploitation.

Of course it should also be noted that where recordings of local artists are not available, community broadcasters, like the ABC, have a long tradition of working with artists to create live recordings of their work.

As previously noted, the application of a 20 per cent Australian quota across the majority of community stations, ensures an active engagement with the local musicians within communities.

Another important outcome from this grass roots engagement with the musical interests and practices of local communities is a responsiveness to shifts within the musical culture.

The most recent illustration of this responsiveness is seen in the growth of dance and electronic music on community radio.

And perhaps the most obvious example of this can be found in the number of 'dance music' aspirants competing for the new community licences in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane.

In these cases, high profile and well supported applicants have based their argument for a licence on the significance of dance music within their local community, and the lack of access to this music through other radio services.

Similarly, several existing community stations in these areas have seen a significant increase in the amount of dance and electronic music they broadcast, which is reflective of the interests of their volunteers and audiences. In these cases there is also an active engagement with the local musicians making this sort of music.

A station such as 2SER in Sydney, which has moved to a predominantly 'electronic' music format, maintains this connection not only through the broadcast of local artists cds, but through the presentation of live events featuring these musicians, and through compilation cds of local musicians work, released under the 2SER banner.

The diversity of music programming within the community broadcasting sector, combined with a broad based Australian content quota, has the effect of ensuring that community radio services reflect the breadth of interest amongst Australian audiences and musicians. In this sense then they fulfil the social and cultural aims outlined in the Broadcasting Services Act which propel the maintenance of Australian content quotas.

Importantly these aims are also cited as the impetus for the commercial radio codes of practice. However whereas the music programmed on community radio is largely driven by community interest, commercial priorities are intrinsic to the practice of commercial music programming.

As Mick Counihan has detailed, this tension between the cultural aims and industrial outcomes of Australian music content quotas for radio has existed since their proposal and introduction in 1942. Of the first content quota he notes,

It's importance is that it applied specifically cultural development goals to commercial broadcasting for the first time and ... if we except copyright legislation, the quota was for many years the only form of government assistance to Australian popular music. (*Media Information Australia* 1992:7)

This tension between cultural and commercial considerations is still evident in the current Commercial Radio Codes of Practice. While the code states that

The commercial radio industry is committed to supporting the music of Australian artists and composers.

It also indicates that it will, continue to encourage the increased production by the record industry of Australian music relevant to stations formats.

In fact, the commercial code of practice reserves the right for the quotas to be revised downwards from their current levels if there is a substantial decrease in the number of appropriate Australian titles released.

Importantly, information regarding the musical activity of Australians is provided and mediated by the commercial recording industry.

Changes and developments in the musical interests of the Australian community are therefore only relevant to the code when they have reached a threshold of profitability. Given the substantial invest-

ment required to obtain and maintain a commercial licence, this is perhaps only realistic.

Certainly, as an industrial initiative, providing support for the production of commercial music in Australia, this Code of Practice works reasonably well, ensuring the mutual benefit of commercial broadcasting and recording interests.


However in terms of addressing the social and cultural objectives of the code, its efficacy may be more difficult to determine.

It is this combination of obvious commercial benefits and uncertain cultural outcomes that has been identified as potentially compromising the sustainability of these local content regulations.

However to discount the necessity for Australian content standards based on their commercial outcomes, runs the risk of overstating the significance of the commercial recording and broadcasting industries in the musical culture of Australia and ignores the social and cultural benefits that flow from quotas when applied to other broadcasting sectors.

It could, for example, be argued that it is the combination of industrial and cultural outcomes created by the existence of quotas across all broadcasting sectors that creates a diverse and sustainable musical culture.

Despite suggestions to the contrary, cultural and industrial benefits are not necessarily mutually exclusive. On their own however, industrial benefits may not be enough to sustain local content regulations. Successful arguments in support of these regulations will need to acknowledge and value the role of all aspects of the broadcasting and music sectors. It may also be necessary to more clearly specify the cultural benefits of the commercial codes of practice.

As noted above, local content regulations are only a means of achieving an agreed set of outcomes. Rather than simply arguing about the percentage of Australian music that should be broadcast, it's likely that the more useful question is, 'What are we trying to achieve?'. 

*This is an edited version of Paul Mason's address — the full text is on the ABA web site: [www.aba.gov.au/conference/index.htm](http://www.aba.gov.au/conference/index.htm)*