

The ABC operates a prototype digital radio station via the internet - www.abc.net.au/dig
By Tony Walker, Manager Digital Radio, ABC.

dig: ABC digital radio

The ABC has been a long-time advocate of digital radio broadcasting (DRB) in Australia and has been a keen participant, along with other industry players, in the range of enquiries, trials and summits that have examined and called for the introduction of DRB here.

In planning for the possibilities of digital radio the Corporation assumes that its existing five domestic analog services (Local Radio, Radio National, ABC Classic FM, Triple J and ABC NewsRadio) will migrate to digital, probably simulcasting in digital and analog for some time.

However, the possibilities offered by DRB's capacity to allow for varied and dynamic configuration of available bandwidth also means the ABC is thinking about new services it might develop to sit alongside its existing networks.

The Director of ABC Radio, Sue Howard, told this year's Broadcasting Summit Conference in Sydney that the Corporation is "keen to explore opportunities to provide

services to meet the needs of audiences who are currently not adequately served by existing networks".

Ms Howard explained that the ABC's new Internet radio station - *dig* - is a prototype of the sorts of services the ABC might provide via DRB.

dig is an Internet radio station playing music for a 30+ audience and it can be found by going to ABC Online at www.abc.net.au/dig.

dig was started because the ABC believes there is a considerable segment of the radio audience that is currently not well served. They are people aged 30 and older who are interested in an eclectic and alternative mix of music and associated information that they can't get from existing radio services, either commercial or ABC - or even community stations on a consistent basis

And Sue Howard believes that identifying and meeting the needs of audiences not currently getting a broad enough serve of their particular cultural interests is an important adjunct to the ABC's role as a public broadcaster.

dig has two clear components: A non-stop music stream and on-demand/interactive features.

Streaming is the delivery of media content over the Internet using data compression and this process allows users to start playing the material as it

arrives at their computer. The ABC uses the Real Media Player and the Windows Media Player to deliver most of its streamed services, and this includes *dig* content. Music in the stream can not be downloaded and saved, nor can users select and play specific tracks.

Music in the audio stream is drawn from just about the broadest range of styles imaginable - everything from modern R&B, funk, blues, country, roots, world, folk, jazz, acid jazz, reggae, dub, techno, ambient, electronica, trance, rap, hip hop, Latin beat, and more! All these styles feature on *dig*. And importantly for an ABC service, around 40 per cent of it is Australian music with the quota expected to grow over the next year.

There are no announcers presenting music in the stream. The media player window chosen to access the stream gives the user all the track information needed - artist, track, album, label, release date, track duration and any current significant information relating to the artist. All this is synchronously updated as each new track begins.

For users wanting extra information, increasingly there are click-throughs from the player window to artists' and other related websites. If track details in the player window are missed, the last 10 tracks played can be seen by clicking on the "Just Played" button located on the *dig* front page.

The player window does not need to remain on the PC desktop while listening to the stream. The window can be minimised allowing users to carry on working, or net surfing, or whatever, while continuing to enjoy the music. In fact, *dig* claims to provide desk-bound office workers, many of whom can't access conventional radio in their workplaces, with a soundtrack for their working day.

The ABC's Manager of Digital Radio, Tony Walker, says most accesses to *dig* occur



overwhelmingly during standard working hours, with the peak coming just after lunch.

"It seems that increasingly people are able to access streaming media from their work computers and that just after lunch they feel they can relax for a little while to do some net surfing and listen to a bit of music after a long hard morning dealing with the business of the day."

Walker says that a series of Thursday lunchtime concert specials being presented by *dig* show an audience spike. "This suggests that there's an audience for the type of performances we've been offering and also that office broadband connections make the experience an enjoyable one."

Apart from the Thursday concerts, which are encoded at 96 kilobits per second (kbps - a measure of bandwidth, which is the amount of data that can flow in a given time), *dig* generally offers streamed content encoded at the standard ABC bit rate of 20 kilobits per second.

Walker says that, in providing a music service, the ABC would like to be offering *dig* at much higher bit rates for people who have broadband connections. "Twenty kilobits per second is suitable for dial-up connections, but there's no doubt that the streaming media experience is far more enjoyable at higher bit rates via broadband, where you have much better quality sound and a far more robust connection."

However, the Corporation is unable to offer more broadband streams until it has completed a major infrastructure upgrade. Then, Walker says, *dig* listeners with broadband connections will be able to enjoy a greatly enhanced user experience.

Content available on demand on *dig* comes in a number of forms and from a range of sources.

Walker says this content is often produced in partnership with other ABC networks and, increasingly, with external institutions. "You can go to the site now and hear concerts recorded by *dig* and ABC Radio National's live music production unit from prime music events such as the Queenscliff Music Festival, WOMADelaide, the Port Fairy Folk Festival and the Melbourne Music and Blues Festival."

The site has also organised and recorded its own events and worked with program teams

from within ABC Radio to produce content for both the standard networks and *dig*.

A recent example of this involved the US folk-punk trio, the Violent Femmes, who were in Australia for a concert tour. The band visited ABC Radio's Melbourne studios where they played five songs live and did an interview with 774 ABC Melbourne's evening show host, Derek Guille. The performance and the interview were also videoed by students from the TV production course at Melbourne's RMIT University.

"Derek took the audio recording and produced it into a feature for his radio program. We took the audio and video and the RMIT students did the post production and gave us a 30-minute video concert feature," Walker said.

"Everybody got something from the exercise - the 774 audience got a special feature, the *dig* audience got the enhanced experience of a video concert feature and RMIT gained professional experience for its students while the students got work for their portfolios and another line for their CV's."

"These sorts of partnerships make it possible for us to spread costs amongst a range of participants who all get some low-cost high-value return," Walker said.

Other *dig* audio content available on demand includes interviews with performers, CD reviews and archival material from the ABC's extensive program vaults.

There's also a text-based music news service, updated each day from Monday to Friday, text-based reviews, columns and opinion pieces, guest books and forums and a quiz.

The audience response to *dig* has generally pleased the ABC. Within two weeks of its launch in November last year, *dig* was getting 150,000 accesses a week - putting it well within the top 10 ABC online sites. An ABC cross-platform promotion campaign

as well as limited external advertising accompanied the launch, and while audience numbers have slipped a little since then, *dig* is still getting around 100-thousand accesses a week, making it consistently one of the ABC's most visited online sites.

This response confirms Sue Howard's view that there is a significant audience for the type of content being offered by *dig*.

"*dig* began as an Internet only service because we wanted to trial a certain amount of targeted broadcasting as cheaply as possible", she said.

In fact, the *dig* unit is quite modest in staff and budget, and quite unlike the huge dotcom operations that characterised the early days of Internet radio. Currently *dig* runs with three dedicated staff positions and a small budget capacity to commission external content. This is made possible by the ability of the ABC to draw in-house expertise from across all its divisions, as well as the sharing and re-versioning of content across multiple platforms.

Although known primarily as an Internet service, *dig* has already started to colonise small bits of ABC output beyond the net. For instance, its music stream is also available - in CD quality - as an audio service on Digital TV Channel 200, and on Radio National from midnight until 1 am Monday to Friday. It is also currently the ABC radio service provided as part of the DR2000 digital radio trials on air in Sydney on the L-Band using Eureka 147 technology.

In launching *dig* the ABC is looking to build a rich experience for people who love music, and who aren't getting what they want from other ABC Radio services, or from the commercial sector.

But Sue Howard says, importantly *dig* is also preparing the way for new digital radio services based on the ABC principles of innovative and comprehensive programming that entertains and promotes the performing arts in Australia.

"*dig* is the sort of new service the ABC is seeking to provide on digital radio. It's an inexpensive way to make radio and it allows us to showcase particularly Australian music and culture - which is an important part of our charter."



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