



Community stations left to flounder

Mike Thompson, General Manager, Community Broadcasters' Association of Australia

The first half of the 1990s was not a particularly fruitful time for the community radio sector. We can only trust that our efforts will show better results as we approach the new century, and as we make more concerted efforts to harness new technologies and develop our sector of broadcasting.

It is no secret that the freeze on new licenses which goes back to 1992 has been far more detrimental for community broadcasting than for any of the other sectors. As the numbers of frustrated community aspirants multiplied, and the ABA constantly assured us that as poorly resourced as they were they could not move more quickly, both the National and commercial sectors were able to circumvent the planning process and dramatically increase their radio outlets.

Under the former Labor government, ABC's Triple J expanded dramatically to more than 50 new sites, while SBS radio achieved a second frequency in Sydney and Melbourne, as well as an expansion to Darwin and the other capitals. The commercials, of course, were not interested in expansion of their sector in areas where it would involve additional competition for existing operators, but stations in markets where there was only one commercial AM operator were desperate for an FM channel. So they were handed the additional FM channel on a plate in more than 50 markets when the Government obligingly amended section 39 of the Broadcasting Services Act to take them out of the planning process - which in theory was supposed to apply to everyone.

In the meantime, as if the Government's initiatives for others was not

enough cause for disillusionment, the ABA devised a scheme for selling open narrowcast licenses at \$29 a year for low powered services so that we could have tourist radio and racing services. Alas, by and large the tourists did not tune in, so some of the more entrepreneurial of the licensees diverted their attention to providing a 'community-style' service to people in their coverage area. Although the problem has been relatively limited so far, it has worried our members sufficiently for us to make representations to the ABA and begin compiling a complaints register so that we can make a collective complaint to the ABA. If the Community Broadcasters' Association of Australia (CBAA) does nothing we can be sure that there will be many more quasi-community radio services established that compete directly with legitimate licensed services.

So community broadcasters have had half a decade of substantially increased competition from other service categories, but no opportunity for expansion on our own part. Both the Coalition Government and the ABA say that things are about to change. We can only hope that this time around they will deliver on their promises.

Filling the gaps

Within the next five years we hope to see many more community stations licensed, particularly in centres of significant population where there is not yet a 'general purpose' community station. Community broadcasting is a grass-roots movement that cannot be manufactured to fit a particular timetable, especially one

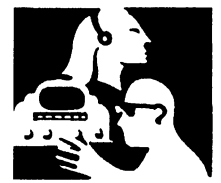
as erratic as that periodically proposed by the ABA. So the Minister must reserve frequencies in centres where there is a reasonable prospect of community aspirants developing in the same way he sets aside frequencies for National broadcasting services.

Maintaining the purpose

Community broadcasters have been under increasing financial pressure in recent years from increased costs and falling levels of government assistance, as well as from added competition from the National, commercial and narrowcasting sectors. Although community stations, as non-profit organisations, are exempted from paying 'economic rent' for their use of the spectrum, the survival pressures are still extreme and there is a very real temptation to commercialise program formats in order to maximise income from sponsorship. It becomes increasingly difficult to ensure that the natural drive to make the stations sound 'better' - and therefore more attractive to sponsors - does not impinge on their essential charters: to provide a voice for the people. This will be a critical issue for the sector over the next five years.

Community radio's market

For 'general purpose' community radio stations the future must be essentially local. The National services are mostly on relay from Sydney or Melbourne, and this will soon become the norm for commercial radio. Within a few years, two or three companies are likely to control the bulk of commercial stations in Australia, distributing syndi-



cated programs by satellite with few local 'windows'. The local nexus will be lost, and the gap there for community radio to fill. The most successful stations will really hammer home this advantage when serving and seeking support from their local communities.

New technology

In the closing weeks of the term of the former Labor Government, the CBAA was able to secure a contract with the Department of Social Security to participate in its pilot Community Information Network (CIN) Project which linked participating community organisations in Brisbane, Canberra, Adelaide and Tasmania with the DSS network, the CBAA, the Internet and with each other.

The project is designed to improve the eleven participating stations' connections with their communities and to provide access to a richer source of programming ideas and participants. This project has been targeted for funding by the Coalition Government and will involve the establishment of ISDN links between stations so as to improve communications. One of the main benefits of this project is to provide community stations with access to an industry specific news and current affairs service, an important aspect of our independent outlook.

I am writing this article from Boston in the United States where I have today visited a 'community media centre' which may point the way to the future for the community broadcasting sector. The centre provides three community cable TV channels and an Internet training and production facility. There is also a 'radio station' distributing an audio signal

by cable. Being digital, the signal can also be transmitted on FM (and later on a digital radio network) and, of course, the Internet. The 'community media centre' concept is a possible model for the future. All means of distributing an audio signal might be employed, with some 'visuals' introduced to enhance the attractiveness of programs. The advantage of this approach is that the station's connection with its community is strengthened and the creativity of the participants given new outlets. For it is this

the inclusion of community broadcasting services. The challenge will be to ensure that the community sector obtains a fair and equitable 'slice of the action', whatever the costs of entry to the new medium. Unaffordable access is no access at all.

It might be valuable to look at the rules cable operators are obliged to follow in the United States and Canada if they wish to provide a service to a particular community. The cable company must set aside capacity for a

community access service and help fund that service through a portion of its commercial revenues. Telephone companies wishing to provide new video services in competition with the traditional cable operators will have to comply with similar 'community media' obligations.

There is also the question of how to integrate within the digital system the many low-powered sub-metropolitan community licensees in Sydney and Melbourne. In discussions with the Government about planning for digital radio, the CBAA has been adamant that

these stations must be provided with the opportunity to convert to digital transmission. There are difficulties to be overcome but it is likely that they can be accommodated in clusters of three or four stations collaboratively serving larger areas of the major cities.

So there is much to think about and plan for in community radio. To remain viable and prosper, the sector must maintain its distinct identity, strengthen its roots within the community it serves and remain ready to take advantage of the new opportunities offered by developments in technology. □



Community Broadcasting

special connection with its audiences that sets apart community broadcasting from the other sectors and gives us our reason for existence.

The digital era

The arrival of Digital Radio Broadcasting (DRB) will present both challenges and opportunities for community radio, as it will for all broadcasters. When new media services are franchised to private operators, who then control the gateways to entry, the Government will have to mandate fair and equitable rules for