

SUBMISSION FROM COMMUNITY RADIO STATION 2BBB-FM (107.3 and 93.3) – BROADCASTING TO THE BELLINGEN SHIRE, NSW

This submission is necessarily brief because of lack of resources, chiefly of the human kind, to fully research details and statistics for a more comprehensive submission. (For information on the station's Organisation Profile and Volunteer Involvement/Management, refer to Appendix 1 and 2. You may also be interested to visit our website at www.2bbb.midcoast.com.au.)

Lack of resources is the theme of this submission. Of course, the resource we don't lack is that provided by the efforts and hours of work put in by our 60 volunteer programmers who keep the radio station broadcasting live to the Bellingen Shire every day from 6.00 am to 11.00 pm. These volunteers range in age from 10 to 85.

In recent months, 2BBB's Board of Directors acquired five new members and in the early months the new Board set itself the task of addressing the financial crisis that the station has succumbed to in the past year. And which, it seems, is a regular feature of volunteer community organisations.

While the radio station has found itself in some considerable debt (having had to borrow a significant sum to continue operating) the Board has identified that the areas of Sponsorship, Fundraising and Volunteer Management need an overhaul and require some serious management and target setting in the next 12 months. The station's Public Profile is also in for some work.

The Board has recognised that being local and broadcasting news and issues relevant to the Shire is one of the station's advantages which will ensure the station has a real future.

What this community radio station is also proud to report is that it is asset rich, in that the station owns its premises (a mud brick studio built on land donated to the station in the early 1980s when the station started operating). The infrastructure is there and the radio station is very much a going concern.

However, over the past few years, 2BBB's audience has been tempted away by access to the commercial radio stations operating in Coffs Harbour (but with owners in the big cities). And the commercial stations are not hampered by the requirement which is imposed on community radio stations that only 5 minutes of sponsorship content are permitted to be played each hour.

If nothing else we ask that your Inquiry considers opening up the possibility for community radio stations to be self-regulating in their approach to allocating sponsorship announcements per hour in each broadcasting day. This will allow 2BBB for one, to increase its income; to be able to fully exploit the sponsorship possibilities in the region and to better provide broadcasting services to the community we serve.

Now that the ABC has regionalised its broadcasting, for the Mid North Coast region, operating out of Kempsey, the Bellingen Shire relies solely on 2BBB for its local news, sports coverage and local public service announcements.

2BBB-FM's local news format includes local news bulletins broadcast four times a day; the fortnightly Mayoral report; the weekly Police report; a weekly Sport Report. The local news bulletins are compiled in cooperation with the Bellingen Shire newspaper, the Courier-Sun (a weekly newspaper) and also include local news items, and items of interest from meetings of Bellingen Shire Council, reported by our volunteer news coordinator. The local news goes to air on Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday. The news bulletins are followed by weather forecasts from the Bureau of Meteorology.

In times of bush fires, floods, water restrictions, and other natural calamities, or otherwise, the local community relies on receiving immediate and up to date bulletins from 2BBB.

The other significant contribution that the community radio station makes by existing and operating as a going concern is that it provides opportunities for country people to receive on-the-job training in a creative industry and to participate, perhaps initially or for the longer term depending on individual's circumstances, in volunteer work that offers challenges and satisfaction for people who may be seeking that type of outlet for their abilities. 2BBB-FM makes the Bellingen Shire a very interesting place. It's a Shire with a small population and it has its own radio station.

Bellingen Shire people are very proud that such an ambitious and different enterprise has been established and has survived certain difficulties, as do many other voluntary organisations, in staying afloat in its 17 years in operation.

2BBB's impact on the community is from a structured workplace providing work skills as well as being a medium for people's need for a creative outlet. In an area of high unemployment, the station offers unpaid work and a sense of purpose to those looking for activity and job satisfaction. Sometimes volunteers secure paid employment as a follow-on from their voluntary efforts here.

As explained earlier, this local community radio station is battling to survive in a world of regionalised radio stations which are funded well by either government or by commercial concerns. Apart from lifting restrictions on the number of sponsorship announcements the station can play per hour, we would also suggest that, in an ideal world, the Federal Government might offer grants to community radio stations to give them a boost, and this funding might be provided over a period of three years. Such funding would be used for hiring specialised expertise in various areas of radio broadcasting, management or marketing and for venturing into improved outside broadcasting and other technological enhancements, which are currently out of reach.

At present, as a volunteer organisation operating on a shoe-string budget, the station progresses in fits and starts, its format and quality of output relying on the talents and expertise that walks through the door in the form of its volunteers. In many cases, to a great extent, this is enhanced by the in-house training program offered by the station to volunteer programmers. The training course is compulsory for all programmers, it standardises and promotes a uniform format and code of conduct, and creates skilled radio programmers who may go on to paid employment at other radio stations. The ABC's John Thompson and Helen Murkel, both started out as volunteers at 2BBB.

From 2BBB-FM we offer two recommendations for consideration by this special inquiry:

- 1. That the requirement for community radio stations to be restricted to 5-minutes of sponsorship content per hour, be lifted;**
- 2. That a grants scheme be established to provide funding, on application for special purposes, for community radio stations to apply for a lump sum grant to be paid over 3 years. This scheme would give local community radio stations the boost they need to work on a vision rather than concentrating all efforts on “merely surviving”. This vision could include the exploration of new technologies which may require paying for the services of experts to advise and to train volunteers in broadcasting in the new age of multimedia which is upon us.**

APPENDIX 1

Organisation Profile

2BBB-FM is a not-for-profit organisation relying on subscriptions and sponsorship. At present, we have 60 volunteers and 30 sponsors, proving funds from the local community to keep the station operating. The station is owned and run by the Bellingen Community Communications Co-operative Ltd granted a Class C broadcasting by the Federal Government in September 1983. The station's day-to-day operations are controlled by its Board of Directors elected by and from the members of the Co-operative. A number of volunteer day managers and office volunteers assist in the day to day operation of the station.

The Bellingen Shire is a rural area spanning the seaboard to the east (Urunga, Mylestom, Repton), the Bellinger Valley (centred on the town of Bellingen) and to the west, rural and mountainous areas (relating to the town of Dorrigo).

The station is on air 24 hours a day proving a reliable and immediate communication link to the community living in the towns or in remotely located areas sometimes in difficult terrain. The Bellingen shire is a high rainfall area and annually, for particular periods, the Bellinger and Kalang Rivers are either in flood or threatening to flood. During these times, 2BBB-FM can reach all sections of the shire with up to the minute SES, police and school bus service reports.

It follows that people located in outer areas, sometimes cut off by poor roads and bad weather conditions, rely more on radio as a means of participating in events than by actual attendance.

2BBB-FM provides all sections of the community with the opportunity to engage in an important artistic and cultural activity, which makes a vital contribution to the community in the area of music, literature, local current affairs and sport. The individuals and groups contributing to the life of local radio come from all backgrounds, community service organisations, local public services (police, SES, council). Indigenous and multicultural groups, local cultural societies, agricultural groups, local sporting clubs.

The Board's Program Committee has the key objective of supporting Australian music while ensuring cultural diversity. To illustrate, in the past year, 2BBB's program has included the North Coast Music Machine promoting local musicians and gigs (this is complemented by 2BBB's subgroup, the Bellingen Singers, Songwriters and Musicians Society which has monthly performance evenings); a French show (funded by a grant from the Ethnic Affairs Commission); the Sport Report; two world music programs; an Aboriginal music and issues program and the Christian family hour. Annually, the station celebrates International Women's Day when women produce the station's programs for that day. The shire's women in small business and professional practice sponsor this special.

APPENDIX 2

2BBB'S VOLUNTEERS

Involvement

As a community access radio station the policy is that all local people are encouraged to receive training to participate fully in 2BBB-FM. The 60 volunteers currently on our books range in age from 10 to 85.

Young people have a special place at 2BBB-FM. Their involvement is encouraged as programmers and as listeners. 2BBB's continuity as a living and growing part of our community is assured by this special training initiative.

2BBB-FM relies on volunteer workers to act as programmers and there needs to be a pool of available and experienced programmers for regular programming and for casual relief. This is maintained by the station's policy of offer 2 x six-weekly training courses to the community three times a year, one for adults and one for youth. On average, about 10 new trainees graduate from each training course.

Volunteers are involved in all aspects of running a radio station. The broad spectrum of responsibilities carried out by the volunteers ranges from taking on the duties and responsibilities of membership of the Board of Directors to that of providing a regular cleaning service for the station's wholly owned premises.

Fundraising is one of the most important activities of a volunteer enterprise. The station now has a very dynamic Fundraising Committee which is currently putting together its fundraising plan for 2001.

Management

Volunteers are managed within a framework designed to provide guidance, support and recognition.

Generally, most of the volunteers are interested in programming. On first joining the radio station they are encouraged to complete a 2BBB-FM training course, as it is the station's policy that all programmers must be formally trained by 2BBB-FM. Once trained, the new graduates continue with on-the-job training from other trained programmers who act as mentors for the new programmers coming on stream.

For those volunteers who are more interested in performing tasks other than on-air broadcasting, each is assigned a senior volunteer to induct them to 2BBB-FM and to train them in the general procedures supporting each day's on-air activities. These peripheral but important duties include basic office administration extending to computer use.

In a field which encourages good communication, it is 2BBB's policy to ensure that there are good staff communication systems in place. Most day-to-day communications are through the day managers and via the general noticeboard, which includes notices, usually posted by the Board of Directors, the Program Committee or the Fundraising Committee.

From time to time, usually after a meeting of the Board of Directors, a volunteers' meeting is convened to report briefly to the volunteers on the decisions recently made by the Board, to report on finances and other developments, and to provide a means by which the volunteers can give and receive feedback.