

Submission to the Standing Committee on Communications, Transport and the Arts.

Inquiry into the Radio Industry.

Warrumbungles Community Broadcasting Association Incorporated, Coonabarabran .

Where and who we are

War FM Coonabarabran is a community radio station situated in the foothills of the Warrumbungle Mountains in central NSW. It serves the town of Coonabarabran (approx pop.3500) and the adjacent communities of Baradine and Binnaway with a total pop of over 7,000.

Prior to the establishment of community radio the only other reliable radio service available to us was ABC Regional, ABC Fine Music and Triple JJJ. We are just outside the footprint of commercial radio networks, such as the Coralys network, and since the withdrawal of community obligation relevant local community content is almost non-existent. Even regional ABC sources are experienced as being at some distance to us. There is no other radio service that can give us the community input that War FM does.

War FM Coonabarabran was issued its temporary license as part of a concept to set up a regional community radio across at least three and potentially 5 shires. The shires concerned were Coonabarabran, Gilgandra and Coonamble, with the possible later inclusion of Warren and Coolah. It was felt at the time that it was unlikely each shire could support its own station and that the area would be best served by a combined regional station. However, to commence broadcasting the ABA issued 3 individual aspirant licenses to Coonabarabran, Gilgandra and Coonamble.

War FM Coonabarabran has been operating for two years and has found that it certainly can and does successfully operate a 24 hour broadcasting service for its immediate Shire community. Our broadcasting experiences have also indicated that because of the nature of terrain in this particular area, and limitations of output for community radio (10 kilowatt effective radiative power), the proposed transmission site for a single permanent license envisioned for the region, Mount Cenn Cruaich, would not technically serve this community well at all. War FM currently transmits from a site known as Bingie Grumble.

Our material experience has so diverged from the original concept and changed our expectations we feel it can provide useful comment to any re-evaluation of rural and regional broadcasting needs.

What we have experienced

Radio is a preferred medium in our rural area. It's advantage being that information can be handed over while people are at work and engaged in other activities. Its portability means that those working in a range of outdoors situations can continue to listen. It is an important aspect of the long distance driving that is often involved in living in rural areas.

Radio broadcasting has a strong presence in public as well as private spaces, replacing background music in local commercial premises, shops and supermarkets, and featuring frequently as background hold in telephone communications.

The community has embraced its local radio in a way that has surpassed all expectations.

More than forty presenters, ranging in age from nine to eighty three years, are involved at the station. These obviously represent a wide range of community interests. They generate programmes that include information and assistance, entertainment, sporting and cultural activities.

We provide an alternative venue for dialogue with local government whereby the Shire Mayor co hosts a weekly open forum programme. A number of inventive programmes are underpinned by Health, counselling, Drug and Alcohol interests, interests of the visually impaired, frail aged and groups such

as Riding for the Disabled. Programmes are produced by and for youth. The programming is attentive to family and small community social dynamics. Personal services such as birthday greetings, children's announcements, congratulations and get well greetings add significantly to individuals sense of community and the community's overall sense of well being.

An Outside Broadcasting unit is much in demand at local sporting fixtures and community events.

Emergency services that make use of our broadcasting service include Police, RTA, State Emergency Services, Advance Energy.

We are informed, and make good and regular use of information concerning road closures, flooding, local weather conditions and accidents, electricity supply outages –restoration information and of course fire related information. Having been the site of a major bushfire involving fire services from all parts of the state we are acutely aware of the service local community radio can provide in these circumstances.

Small business

The cost structure of community radio has made it more inviting for local small business to participate in a medium they would not otherwise access. Through sponsorship partnerships which are *relevant* to this community are being developed across cultural and commercial interests.

Co operative arrangements with local print media.

We have established a very good relationship with the local newspaper media which emphasises cooperation and exchange rather than competition. The local paper publishes our programme details and as part of a visually impaired and frail aged service we read their print news.

Flexibility

Without the constraints of commercial radio, community radio such as War FM has the capacity to be extremely flexible, and respond very quickly to changing local circumstances and agenda.

Networks

Being in control, being able to choose and participate in networking that's relevant and appropriate for our needs and circumstances, rather than imposed with little regard to our regional and local realities, is very important to us.

Large scale networking does not serve us well. Networking on a local basis with adjacent communities, and availing our selves of links, relays, and networks from choice rather than imposition does make a great deal of sense.

Bringing communities together

For example we broadcast live our local sports events, and when we have teams from adjacent communities who also have community radio, we network coverage. It works extremely well It's the only way these activities get live coverage. It's very beneficial in drawing communities together. It leads to further links and exchanges, both in broadcasting material and 'off air'. This is in stark contrast to commercial radio networks driven form large capital centres.

We make use of satellite technology, relaying Indigenous programmes, amongst others, and responded recently to strong local interest in and associations with the Paralympics, for example, relaying more extensive coverage than is otherwise available.

Distance and geographical realities.

Our geographical position in relation to larger regional centres, whether North, South or East guarantees that we are always "at the edge", at the boundaries, and subject to frequent redefinition in regard to which region we "belong". This impacts across all aspects of community life, the delivery of all manner of services, and makes it particularly important that we have tools and resources to represent ourselves with confidence and specificity; to define who and where we are. Community radio is critical in this regard.

Education and Employment – increasing the skills base in our community

Cutting edge technology has been enthusiastically embraced by presenters as well as an adventurous technical team. We had no idea when we started just how much was possible with technological

advances. Increased exposure, increased knowledge, confidence and skills, translate not only into the quality and range of broadcast service, but significantly add to the overall skills base of the community.

We make the most of latest available computer technology; are capable of running automatically for periods of time, if necessary, and are continually looking at the latest technology to improve links with sister stations and outside broadcasting.

We participate in developing media courses and broadcasting training through TAFE and aim to eventually provide employment opportunities at the station as well as volunteer.

Conclusion

As a result of our experiences we will be arguing for a permanent licence for War FM Coonabarabran, and for an increase in output from Bingie Grumble, that will secure adequate coverage for the adjacent communities in Coonabarabran Shire.

We do not see that an increase in commercial licenses would benefit our situation.

We feel that community radio is the only medium that allows our community to articulate itself in such an enabling way. Because this type of radio has wide acceptance and serves very important needs in rural situation such as ours, we feel it's important for government to ensure there are not huge obstacles that prevent community radio from succeeding.

We do feel that attention to the material, the local and the specific is key to both successful individual community building, and to building regional and larger relations, and we would urge government to bring this to the fore in its evaluation of broadcasting services.

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