

STUDENT YOUTH NETWORK INC
submission – community broadcasting inquiry



**Submission to the House of Representatives
Standing Committee on Communications,
Information Technology and the Arts**



1.0 SYN: A Brief History

The emergence of youth media in Australia is one of the most significant developments in the youth sector over the past few years. SYN-FM is an outstanding part of this youth led movement. The youth media here is multi-media in which young people are the producers and responsible organisers not the market of consumers.

In 2000, the Australian Broadcasting Authority invited applications for four community licences in Melbourne. There were twenty contenders for the community licences. The Student Youth Network or SYN was an aspirant youth radio station that brought together secondary students at Thornbury-Darebin Secondary College and several university radio stations in the long established Student Radio Association (SRA) It was this amalgamated collaboration that was successful in winning of a full-power community license late in 2001.

SYN was not the longest running youth radio project in contention but from the outset it was substantially youth driven. The unique features of the SYN bid were firstly, the involvement of all sections of youth – university students, school students and marginalised young people outside of education - in an organic way ie. the way SYN was structured and functioned facilitated inclusion and cooperation although these features also required active attention. Youth projects are rarely so inherently inclusive. More common are projects specifically targeted to ‘at risk’ youth that operate separately or programs for mainstream young people with low participation of marginalised youth. Secondly, SYN adopted a learning pathways approach for young people with an explicit statement of purposes that emphasised a commitment to ‘access, participation, diversity, education and training’.

On the day of the ABA public hearing (August 2001), the commissioners headed by Professor David Flint presided and an ABA lawyer interrogated the team of young people arguing for SYN. The room was filled with young people sporting red tee-shirts emblazoned with the SYN bulls-eye emblem.

The ABA auctioned a new licence for a commercial FM broadcaster to serve the Melbourne market. The winning bid was \$70 million. In December 2001, the ABA granted SYN a Melbourne-wide FM community radio broadcasting licence to transmit at the same signal power. After a twelve-month period (2002) mainly concerned with raising nearly \$1 million to implement the necessary broadcasting infrastructure, SYN-FM 90.7 commenced permanent broadcasting on 28th January, 2003. In this period the station forged key partnerships with RMIT (University, Union and Student Union), the Office for Youth Affairs and The Department of Education & Training and many other community groups. Ironically, the new youth station broadcasts from the same radio tower as the new commercial station Nova and has the same power and reach.

About half of its broadcast time is allocated to tertiary student programs and the other half to secondary students and other youth programs. Every twelve weeks, the grid of programs spills over to allow for new programs and new presenters. Tertiary students are supported financially and organisationally by a consortium of student associations from all of the metropolitan universities in Melbourne. Secondary students and their teachers in schools are currently supported by two teachers seconded by the Education

Department to develop curriculum and support secondary student broadcasting on SYN-FM.

SYN has become a dynamic radio station providing unparalleled access for young people to participate in creating their own media. Its cross media development strategies into television, print, events and CD production have also given SYN a high profile in the community broadcasting sector and many of the youth-based participation programs developed by SYN have been utilised by community broadcasters across the country. This was recognised in 2003 when the Community Broadcasting Association of Australia presented SYN with the Tony Staley Award for excellence in community broadcasting.

The core innovation is youth participation where the station is operated by young people for the youth community/communities. The organisation's commitment to facilitating the personal and professional development through participation means education and training are a high priority. Young people with skills train others coming into SYN. University students and older young people mentor and support younger teenagers. What is unique about SYN is that the station is run by young people at every level – it is a large scale on-going youth participation project of major significance for the youth of Victoria – a world first in fact. SYN organises an extensive program of participation by school students.

2.0 SYN: An operational overview

The Student Youth Network Inc. (SYN) gained a full-time, full power (Melbourne-wide) community broadcasting license on 12th December 2001, dedicated to serving the Melbourne youth community (12-25 years old). Currently, SYN also produces 10 hours a week of live television (broadcast on Channel 31 Melbourne & Geelong), publishes a quarterly magazine (Pecado), maintains a full-time internet presence including live web-streaming (www.syn.org.au) and provides over twelve hours a week of radio podcasts.

SYN is unique in that it is entirely owned and operated by young-people under the age of 26. This includes volunteer broadcasters, the 120 volunteers in management and operational roles and the majority of the Board of Management and Secretariat. Every year, SYN gives approximately 1000 volunteers (12-25 years) the opportunity to directly participate in the on-air broadcasting and media creation. SYN aims for equal representation of male and female broadcasters, and half of all on-air presenters to be 18 years or younger. Approximately 80 volunteer presenters and 120 volunteer producers/technicians directly participate in television broadcasting every year. All of the television presenters are 18 years or younger, making SYN one of the only television platforms in Australia to showcase teenage hosts.

The organisation's philosophical goals are:

- "to provide young people with opportunities, education and training in all areas of the media;
- to provide an informative and entertaining alternative to mainstream media;
- to support the interests of the youth community;
- to be youth focused and operated, fully;
- to respect local and new music, arts and ideas;
- to represent;
- to keep it real."

To ensure that as many young people as possible are given the opportunity to access airtime, the program grid is completely re-formulated five times a year. All presenters exercise autonomous control over the content, style and music of their show.

SYN has become a dynamic, informative and entertaining media outlet providing unparalleled access for young people to create their own media. Many of the youth-based participation programs developed by SYN have been adopted by community broadcasters across Australia. SYN is potentially the largest youth participation project in Victoria linking education, the arts and social justice and is the first organisation of its kind in Australia. SYN provides a platform for youth expression, and a showcase for excellence in youth communication.

SYN is more than just a content producer; it offers a unique access point and meeting place whereby like-minded youth organisations and individuals collaborate in support of the diverse needs and interests of the youth community. As-a-result, SYN has been able to undertake numerous high-level projects encompassing a broad range of activities involving young people from across Victoria.

Young people are rarely granted a forum in the mainstream media to air their fresh and inspiring views—instead they are habitually disregarded or stereotyped as binge drinkers, drug addicts and trouble makers. SYN empowers young people as creators and not consumers of the media. Moreover, young people are given the opportunity to be innovative at every level of the organisation.

SYN is an innovative example of how non-institutionalized learning can reawaken a love of discovery and creativity in young people who are disenfranchised from mainstream education and youth. SYN already has a number of stakeholders and it is strategically linked to programs provided by: YACVIC, YIKES, FREEZA, The Push, Express Media, The Centre for Multi-Cultural Youth Issues, Debaters Association of Victoria, REACH, the Talkback Classroom, Rock and Roll High School, Kool Skools, Work for the Dole programs, Koori Open Door Education and over 100 secondary schools

3.0 SYN Programming and Content

SYN is a unique network that provides access to young voices which are often excluded by the mainstream media. We provide access and dedicated airtime to indigenous youth, physically impaired youth, youth-at-risk, culturally and linguistically diverse youth, women, gay and lesbian youth, and other marginalised groups. Our content is a perfect vehicle for celebrating diversity.

To undertake such an all encompassing charter SYN has developed a comprehensive education & training program. This includes:

- a secondary-school program in partnership with the Department of Education and Training;
- internships programs with RMIT Journalism and Media & Communications Departments, and the University of Melbourne Media & Communications Department;
- dedicated training resources for:
 - the physically impaired (in partnership with the Department of Human Resources and the Foundation for Young Australians);
 - young women (in partnership with the ANZ Charitable Trust);
 - young-people under the age of 18; and,
 - culturally and linguistically diverse communities
 - indigenous communities.

As well as reflecting diversity of backgrounds, SYN's programming also aims to reflect a diversity of interests. The music presented on SYN includes rock, punk, indie, hip-hop, urban, electronica, reggae, Cantonese, Mandarin, Korean & Indian pop and discussion ranges from sport, politics, music, gender issues, comedy, arts, film, pop culture, computer games and everything in-between.

Media creation enables students to explore ideas, issues, beliefs and the world around them and to develop a greater understanding of how mainstream media is constructed and dominant ideas perpetuated.

SYN's music content aims to present 40% Australian music, half of which is produced locally (Melbourne and Victoria). This includes:

- presenting Melbourne's only 100% Australian music breakfast program;
- recording and broadcasting 50 live performances from Melbourne venues every year;
- presenting an annual 8-week live MC Hip Hop competition featuring 12 young MCs

SYN's support for the local music scene extends beyond the airwaves. SYN currently presents 5 drug and alcohol free all-ages gigs a year and has released an all-Australian original hip-hop compilation album (*The Nodfather*, 2004).

SYN also provides an avenue for local arts, music and event providers to promote their activities to SYN's extensive listening audience.

The success of SYN has demonstrated that young people can and will embrace community-based projects that provide direct benefits – opportunities for learning and practical experience, high levels of social interaction and “street cred” among its

constituents. SYN has found a model that entertains, engages and empowers young-people of all backgrounds. The SYN model has the flexibility to respond to the interests of the younger generation.

4.0 Education and Training

Education and training is a major focus of the Student Youth Network. Since full-time radio broadcasting commenced in January 2003 over **100 secondary-schools** from across Victoria have directly participated in SYN's on-air programming.

SYN's education and training focus is relevant to all students and teachers as an authentic learning model. It is increasingly clear that young people are becoming disenfranchised with traditional forms of education and SYN's education program endeavours to re-engage young people with new and emerging media forms. For example, creating a radio piece on Ned Kelly is infinitely more appealing for some students than writing a formal essay on the same topic. SYN facilitates learning in a positive, practical and youth friendly environment, offering real and tangible outcomes for individuals. The Australian Primary Principal's Association Review of Teaching and Teacher Education ("Young People, Schools and Innovation" 2003), identified multi-media studies as a useful tool for life long learning: *"It (multi-media) not only fosters innovation and creativity, but also a greater engaging between students and learning. The outcomes seen among disenfranchised learners, such as Indigenous students and boys in the challenging middle years' cohort, have been extremely positive."*

Students learn how to use digital recorders and editing software to explore ideas, report on current affairs and tell their own stories. Students develop content, research topics, create scripts, conduct interviews and vox-pops and edit their material into short features or announcements. These short features can then be broadcast at a later date across the SYN radio and television network. Students are encouraged to provide group feedback and evaluate their own work.

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The production of documentary and radio features helps to foster kinaesthetic learning opportunities and allows students to foreground their voice in the wider community. Through SYN Radio and Television, individual viewpoints can be exposed to a broad audience. Students are presented with an alternative form of learning that is creative, innovative and most importantly fun. Students emerge as creators rather than consumers of media.

Students learn how to construct a range of spoken, written, visual and multimedia texts and analyse complex ideas and issues. They apply strategies in interconnected, flexible ways to adopt and evaluate communication practices required for effective participation in the world around them. They also understand the sophisticated ways in which communication technologies may be varied and combined to fulfill a range of requirements for learning.

As part of this program, each year SYN allocates over 450 broadcast hours for the exclusive use of state secondary schools. SYN also hosts twenty outside broadcasts during lunchtime at twenty schools every year. The SYN [Live@Lunch](#) program uses individual Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLEN) to help manage this process.

For students, hands-on media learning outcomes are endless. The preparation and presentation of a media product provides an arena in which to explore learning outcomes and build self confidence.

Students learn how to research stories, develop insightful questions, conduct interviews, script intros and blend sound effects to create interesting digital stories and audio pieces for diverse audiences. Students understand how to prepare for a radio program by producing running sheets, rehearsing segments, creating fillers and teasers, selecting music and using studio equipment such as CD players, microphones, headphones and the mixing desk.

The ethos of community radio encourages students to become involved in their local community and develop an understanding of how a not-for-profit organisation works. There is a need to encourage more community broadcasters to involve young people in their operations, and in particular secondary school aged students.

5.0 Technological Developments

Media literacy for young people is as important as traditional literacy. It gives students critical understanding and active participation, developing critical and creative abilities. The media is the major socializing influence in our society and the main means of cultural expression and communication: to become an active participant in public life necessarily involves making use of the modern media.

As online technologies invariably involves media, posting a blog on a website, creating a video or radio piece to be heard by others, is essential for young people to engage more with school and society in general. Community broadcasting is capable of providing organizational supports and structures to support this type of social connectedness.

At present SYN podcasts a handful of interviews and audio on demand. We are keen to continue and build our podcasting capabilities over the next 12 months. Currently there is a lack of music copyright arrangements for podcasting.

New technologies have completely changed audience's media consumption patterns. We believe that cross-platform productions can increase our volunteer involvement and pioneer new technologies and that community broadcasting has the potential to pioneer and be the incubator of many new ideas within digital broadcasting in Australia.

SYN currently simulcasts the radio broadcast on the internet and podcasts a number of flagship programs. This has taken a great deal of organisational and structural ground work and support from SYN and is still under resourced and really in its emerging stages.

SYN is exploring opportunities to create unique content for new forms of media. There is certainly a rise in interest from our community in access to blogging, pod casting and general digital media creation. SYN is also exploring utilising mobile phone technologies to create video content for its television productions and audio for its radio programs.

To remain relevant to young people, community broadcasting will need to address digital content distribution and new media developments in the future.

6.0 Opportunities and Threats for SYN

6.1 Funding

While SYN remains on the cutting-edge of media innovation, both in terms of content and development activities, paying the bills remains a month-to-month proposition. This is despite SYN's success in forging partnerships with various Government, philanthropic and commercial organisations.

SYN currently operates on a budget of approximately \$500,000 pa. The major sources of revenue are:

- Education & Training (approx. \$150k – includes \$25k from the Victorian Dept Education & Training)
- Sponsorship (\$100k)
- Student Unions (\$60k)
- Federal Government Funding via Community Broadcasting Foundation (\$50k):
- Philanthropic partnerships (\$40k)

The major expenditure items are:

- Staffing (\$150k)
- Administration and Maintenance (\$120k)
- Transmission (\$95k)
- Education & Training (\$60k – does not include managerial staffing)

SYN is barely survives financially and in its current state is severely under funded, given the amount of projects and initiatives that it manages. There is a need for more targeted and direct funding for community broadcasters and at present there is little to no funding available to support the 'general operations' of a community media organisation.

With the passing of the *Higher Education Support (Abolition of Compulsory Up-Front Student Union Fees) Act 2005*, Voluntary Student Unionism threatens SYN's existing funding from Student Unions and is a major threat to the biggest amount of 'un-targeted' financial support for SYN., being the money currently provided by student unions.

6.2 Technology

To remain relevant to young people, community broadcasting will need to address digital content distribution. There is a specific opportunity for community broadcasting to expand into multiple platforms. At present, our view is that broadband and the growth of wireless internet is an important part in a changing media consumption culture, especially amongst young people.

SYN views its biggest opportunity at present in commencing exploration into how mobile phones and podcasting can be utilised by SYN and throughout the Victorian Education system.

The introduction of digital radio to Australia presents a series of exciting challenges for SYN and the sector. It is absolutely necessary that funding support for digital transmission be provided. Community Television's (C31 Melbourne & Geelong) lock-out of existing digital platform – has already significantly reduced potential audience and the greater potential to develop unique new digital content.

6.3 Staff, Resources and Space

Our current staff structure only remotely supports the project in its current state. As a young organisation, SYN is still very much in our early stages of development. While SYN has come along in leaps and bounds over the past three years, there are still a number of issues that the organisation needs to address in the short-, medium- and long-terms.

The organisation has survived thus far off the back of committed volunteers; however, this has always been considered a short-term proposition. Unless legal and financial accountabilities are placed onto dedicated employees, SYN's long-term sustainability remains in a precarious position and SYN could quite possibly not survive in the long-term, if the project doesn't have the necessary support staff and mechanisms.

SYN is currently seeking seed funding to undertake a feasibility study into the building of the Victorian Youth Arts & Media Centre, to help combat a major problem of a lack of real space and resources to support our projects.

The proposed Victorian Youth Media and Arts Centre is an envisaged centre that will establish a substantial communal space for young people. Housing the administrative operations of a number of youth-based community organisations and will offer a range of support services for marginalised young-people as-well-as providing a myriad of activities and opportunities for all young-people.

SYN has initiated this project due to the absence of any communal space specifically aimed at engaging and empowering young-people.