

Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Communications, Transport and the Arts

Regional Radio Inquiry

From Radio 2UNE, University of New England, Armidale, NSW

INTRODUCTION

This submission is made by Radio 2UNE to the House of Representatives Committee on Communications, Transport and the Arts inquiry into regional radio services.

ADDRESSING THE TERMS OF REFERENCE

Radio Benefits in Non-Metropolitan Australia

Radio in Regional Australia is an important medium. Radio is portable, it is personal and it is a companion.

As in Metropolitan Australia, many people listen to the radio whilst traveling in a car. This is particularly important for the isolated living long distances from major regional centres, along with those who regularly travel between towns and cities.

Radio is a very personal medium, the person presenting any given program should share something in common with the listener, and being "a local" is one thing that will always give people something to share. People will care when the banks close, when the local council deliberates over the new shopping centre proposal or wants some ideas on what to do with the local parks.

That having been said, people in your local community are also citizens of your state or territory, and we are all citizens of Australia. It is also important that people, and the media keep that in perspective as well. **There are plenty of good reasons to use a state or national based service to supplement the local services that stations should be providing, and finding the right mix is important.**

Community Radio exists to provide alternative viewpoints, and to allow access to the airwaves for people who are not otherwise represented on air. In every community there are always people who are marginalised, on the fringe of mainstream society by any number of factors. Community Radio should aim to represent these people in the same way as it does in Metropolitan Australia. In

regional areas, however, this may mean that there is a much more diverse range of programming, owing to a great number of smaller sub-communities that feel they need the support of their Community Radio station.

In either case it is often much harder for regional community radio to survive. Many markets are highly dominated by commercial players, and hence Community Stations find it hard to raise funds through sponsorship. In 2UNE's case this is made more difficult because of its limited transmission area.

2UNE has been fortunate through its 30 year history that the majority of its funding has come through the Students' Representative Council (SRC) and its successors (presently the UNE Students' Association). However declining Internal student numbers mean that much more income must now come through Sponsorship and other avenues. **This has implications due to the legal requirements of 2UNE's narrowcast licence.** (see Appendix A)

Future Trends

In recent years we have seen a trend from the Licence Area Planning process to allocate more stations in most markets, including "section 39" FM commercial stations in solace markets, the increased coverage of ABC services, notably Classic FM and JJJ, along with increasing numbers of Community stations. This has given the listener more choice in what station they may choose to listen too, but has seen some narrowing in the services provided by each station.

The introduction of the supplementary FM licence in solace markets has had a big effect on the proliferation of networking. Sole broadcasters were already drawing a large percentage of the advertising dollar out of their markets. The introduction of secondary commercial stations has not seen large increases in advertising spending, and therefore both the original and supplementary stations have had to cut costs, and to do this they have cut services, leading to extensive networking.

Extensive networking, in turn, means a loss of jobs in the local communities, as fewer staff is employed at these stations. There is little incentive for potential announcers to stay in regional areas, so they migrate to either the major centres or Capital Cities. Many former staff from 2UNE moved on to other stations in all sectors of the radio industry, but we see less and less of this happening.

Owners of these stations and networks seems to also expect a greater and greater return from their investments, even though regional areas have seen declines in both populations and business spending money on advertising. If these trends

continue, we may very well see the day when regional stations become mere relays of stations from Capital cities. or larger regional areas.

2UNE would submit that licence conditions should be imposed on regional commercial stations to ensure that a level of local programming is maintained.

The increased number of ABC services has, in many cases, drawn away from Community Radio. Those who wish to listen to "alternative" or "classical" music in particular have ceased listening to programs on their local community station in favour of the national services.

However the ABC may have now been spread too thin. As 2UNE shares a lot of potential audience with JJJ we often hear that JJJ has now become "too mainstream" and that it has lost its diversity in needing to appeal to a wider variety of listeners across Australia.

The loss of Country Music programming and the John Laws show from many of the stations in Northern NSW recently provided an opportunity for Community Radio to fill. However common complaints still exist, particularly that of a low quality of presentation. It is a challenge for small station to find the staff and expertise to ensure the staff of their stations is well trained.

For Community radio these changes may mean a boon, or total failure. As people may tend to drift away from networked stations, they may join Community Radio station, swelling membership numbers, listeners and increase the income from sponsorship. Alternatively it could see people abandoning radio all together, resulting in stations becoming bankrupt and ceasing operation, leaving little or no real local content in regional radio.

2UNE would submit that more funding be allocated to regional Community Radio stations to ensure that these stations can provide a high quality local product. Specific areas would include training of on-air volunteers, provision of outside broadcast (OB) services, and assistance with employing staff to ensure smooth operations of the stations.

We can already see both trends occurring. People feeling unhappy with commercial radio and JJJ have switched to 2UNE, while others have switched off the radio and now listen to CDs.

In recent years we have seen the loss of horse racing coverage, first from Commercial Radio, and then from the ABC Local services. This has led to a widespread setting up of rebroadcasts of 2KY from Sydney on both Low Power Open Narrowcast licence issued from the Australian Communications Authority and High Power Open Narrowcast licences issued by the ABA in the LAP process.

Clearly racing radio is viewed as an important service for these High Power licences to be issued by the ABA, but it does increase the non-local content, as there is not even local advertising inserted into these services.

In 2UNE's case the trend towards Distance Education, especially at UNE, has seen changes in the make up of the student body at the University of New England. With pressure from the University to reduce the costs to External students, 2UNE is finding that there is a significant loss of funding which it is being forced to make up from other sources, which again has implications for the station with regard to its Narrowcast licence (see Appendix A)

Effects of Networking

While 2UNE provides some non-local programming, primarily from the Community Radio Satellite, **we view this as an opportunity to expand our programming** to represent people in the community who are not otherwise represented on air, but are unable or unwilling to do programs. 2UNE's service is almost entirely local to Armidale and the University of New England.

Networking in a larger sense has meant a narrowing of what is provided via the Commercial broadcasters in Armidale, and has allowed us to expand some of our program variety. One particular example of this is Country Music.

In a more general sense however, networking means that the people presenting on air programs on stations now have little to nothing in common with the people listening. We cannot hear comments about the local sports results or what council is doing as often as we used to. Local news is missing from the weekend line-ups of many stations, and only pre-recorded Community Service announcements have a chance to be played during this time.

One of the reasons that Networking has progressed to the level that presently exists in the radio industry is because many people did not or do not necessarily realise that the programming that they are listening to are not coming from their local

studios. However people are coming to realise that programming is not always originating locally, and can in some cases come from 1000km or further away.

The national networks, such as JJJ identify occasionally where their programming is coming from (for example "the Net 50 tonight is coming to you from JJJ's Melbourne studios"). Programs distributed via the Community Radio Satellite also identifies the origination station (for example "Radio Babylon is produced in the studios of 2MCE in Bathurst NSW, and is broadcast around Australia by the Community Radio Satellite.")

2UNE would strongly recommend that commercial stations be required to identify the originating source of programming that is broadcast by a licensee.

In the cases of local emergency, how often do commercial stations remove the network feed in order to cover these events? It has been shown a number of time when flood and fires have occurred that many stations will not provide these services, leaving often understaffed and ill-equipped Community stations to provide this service.

2UNE provides an almost entirely local service, with some programming taken from other sources to supplement the local line up and to this end broadcasts 15.5 hours of non-local programming each week.

2UNE provides a local news service each morning, using material from local press releases and local newspapers. 2UNE believes that it is important to be a locally relevant service to students and other youth in Armidale.

In the times where live announcers are not on air 2UNE broadcasts continual music aimed at our listener base from tapes created by announcers at 2UNE.

New Technologies

At the present time Digital Radio Broadcasting (DRB) looks like a very expensive proposition for any regional station, while it is totally out of reach of any community station.

Unless significant amounts of funding are forthcoming from the government and stations are forced off the FM and AM bands at the end of the proposed simulcasting period, we may find regional areas without Community Radio, and possibly back to one solace commercial broadcaster. The costs of the new technologies are very high for little perceived benefit. Add to this the

unwillingness of the regional consumer to purchase new receiving equipment, especially as the Digital Television conversion will be happening at a very similar stage, there may be a loss of radio services to many individuals if analogue is switched off.

2UNE's future is becoming increasingly unsure in the Digital Future, not only with regards to declining funding, but also because access to digital broadcasting has not yet been guaranteed for Narrowcasters. Even if this access was certain, funding must also be provided to stations to convert their operations to a digital platform.

The possible introduction of satellite radio services in digital broadcasting may only encourage networking practices from commercial players. Whilst the cost of a single satellite licence may be much more than that of a terrestrial licence, there will be an attractiveness in one licence replacing those of several stations.

The use of the Internet is still not prolific enough for people to consider setting up a local radio station on line. This would become even more difficult in regional areas where there is still a lack of infrastructure to allow reliable audio streaming. In addition many older people would simply not use a service based around a personal computer.

Given the great distances involved, the possibility of damage to lines is great. The use of radiofrequency broadcasting, although fraught with difficulties in some areas, relies only on the transmitter (and any links used to get signals to those transmitters), and is much less likely to fail.

CONCLUSION

Radio 2UNE is a somewhat unique station in Australia, it now holds an Open Narrowcasting licence, limiting the transmission power to 10 Watts (see Appendix A). It is the only Narrowcast Station to obtain full membership of the Community Broadcasting Association of Australia. The station broadcasts 24 hours a day, 7 days a week to the Campus of the University of New England and the City of Armidale in Northern NSW.

Radio is an important communications medium in non-Metropolitan Australia, providing a primary means of communication with many people.

In the current climate of networking, it seems likely that, unless there is regulatory intervention, the trend will continue, removing the local relevance of radio from

non-Metropolitan Australia, and reducing employment and career opportunities in regional Australia.

The increased networking has also meant that there has been a loss of local content in regional areas, including local news, coverage of sporting events, and other local services, and even in times of emergency, many stations will not leave the network feed.

It seems unlikely at this stage that new technologies, such as digital radio will provide for enhanced localism in regional radio. The high costs of moving to a digital platform will bring about more networking, or worse see a reduction in the number of stations, to cover these increased costs.

The government will need to step in to ensure that the loss of localism in regional radio is halted, if not reversed, both by providing incentives and licence conditions to commercial broadcasters, and by assisting Community Radio.

Community Radio is often under funded. Providing funding for stations to maintain their equipment, and more importantly to ensure that the volunteers of community radio are well trained may provide a much better solution.

Enhancing Community Radio stations, that are already the most local stations in the country by their very nature, is possibly the best solution. Community radio has shown over many years that it can be of great benefit to the community to which it is licenced, while placing very little cost upon those communities. Community radio, in this way, can justify itself and support and continue its operations into the new millenium.

APPENDIX A – About 2UNE

So that members of the committee might gain an understanding of the place that 2UNE holds in the Radio industry in Australia, we wish to first outline some of the history of the station and its current status.

History

In around 1967 a group of five students arranged with Armidale's commercial radio station 2AD to present a pre-recorded, half hour radio show each week which was aimed at a significant student audience. The program ran for six months, until 2AD and the students disagreed upon the suitability of a number of interviews about an anti-Vietnam War protest that was being staged in Armidale, and the program was then withdrawn.

Professor Nevil Fletcher from the University of New England's Department of Physics then presented the idea of a student operated radio station, similar to those in operation in the United States, to some UNE students who were enthusiastic about the idea.

The then Vice Chancellor, Professor Zelman Cowen agreed to support the idea of a closed loop campus only radio station, which meant that the station could only be heard inside on-campus buildings. The then Students' Representative Council (SRC) agreed to provide finances and support the station. An application was made to the Postmaster General and a licence was eventually issued.

The station was designed and constructed by students, and commenced operation on 27th April 1970 as Radio UNE, transmitting at 1630kHz just off the AM band.

After its opening in 1970, Radio UNE was received enthusiastically by students and staff at the University. Its programming was mainly rock and pop music, but there was also substantial spoken word content. In 1975, after five years of broadcasting, Radio UNE had an annual budget of \$10,000 and a voluntary staff and more than fifty people. The facilities had expanded to two studios and five broadcast quality tape recorders.

With the acceptance by the Commonwealth Government of the idea of Community Broadcasting, the station prepared a submission in 1975 for an experimental licence.

The University of New England Community Radio Co-Operative Ltd was formed, and took over the running of Radio UNE, and held the experimental licence. The station went on air and during its initial broadcasts was known as 2UNE-FM, but the Armidale community felt that they should be involved in the station, since they could now receive it, and the station became 2ARM-FM. Radio UNE continued its operation under the management of the Co-Operative.

In around 1979, the SRC refused to fund the operations of 2ARM as they felt that the station no longer served students, and a split occurred with 2ARM moving into the Armidale Town Hall basement, and Radio UNE returning to the control of the SRC. This is a split that has, from time to time, caused difficulties in the relationship between the two stations.

In 1985 problems developed with the way Radio UNE operated, and how people could receive the station. Many of the newer radios of the time could no longer receive the signal at 1630kHz as the bands on these receivers did not reach this far. The station breached its licence conditions, moving to 1611kHz and changing the aerial systems so that people could hear it, but were required to move back to the licenced operating conditions by the District Radio Inspector's office.

The station then made submissions for a change in its operating conditions, and was granted a communications licence on 106.9MHz FM, initially at a power of 5 Watts, but this was reduced to 1 Watt after complaints. The signal was also directed wholly at the campus area of the University.

Current Status of 2UNE

During the 1990's a number of attempts were made to gain a Community Broadcasting Licence, but the Australian Broadcasting Authority and its predecessors denied each application.

The most successful attempt to gain a Community licence ended with the station being granted an Open Narrowcast licence, on its frequency of 106.9FM at an output of 10 Watts, and this continues to this day, allowing the station to cover the City of Armidale. The licence contains a number of conditions upon programming along with income restrictions.

The station has always operated as a community based station, and indeed the speech by the then Vice Chancellor, Professor Cowen, which launched the station, contained many of the ideals that now govern Community Broadcasting in Australia. 2UNE is the only Narrowcasting station to become a full member of the

Community Broadcasting Association of Australia (CBAA) and the Northern NSW Community Media Association (NNSWCMA).

The last Licence Area Plan (LAP) draft included the possibility of the allocation of a second Community licence for Armidale, but this was not made available in the final plan. Therefore 2UNE broadcasts to a limited market in Armidale, despite many students now living beyond the boundaries of its transmission.

The argument that gained the stations its limited Narrowcast licence was a change in where students were living. Students have moved first from living in Collages to the City of Armidale, and now they have moved even further into surrounding areas including: Uralla to Armidale's south-west on the New England Highway; the Tilbuster area to Armidale's north; and Invergowrie to Armidale's west along with smaller numbers in other areas outside the city. Reasons for this appear to be mainly that the cost of living in these areas is lower.

2UNE is heard alongside the Armidale Community Radio station 2ARM, the commercial stations 2AD and FM100.3, 2KY, Radio National, ABC Local (New England/North West), ABC Classic FM and JJJ.

In a market of 9 stations, 2UNE is a very limited station because of its status as a Narrowcaster, limited by power, licence conditions on its programming, and as a niche market station serving a low socioeconomic group.

And yet 2UNE serves several important purposes for the Staff and Students of the University of New England. It provides a source of information, news and targeted communications programs, along with the opportunity for training and skills development for voluntary staff.

For more than 30 years 2UNE has provided work experience and entertainment for the students of the University of New England, and more recently to others in late secondary and non-University tertiary education sector in Armidale.

The station provides in many ways a microcosm of how service to the community can be of great benefit to all concerned over a long period without much cost to the wider community, and well justifies any measures to support and continue its operations into the new millennium.