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NORTH COAST RADIO INC.
ABN: 75 224 975 728

Submission 127

21 June 2006

The Secretary
House Standing Committee on Communications, Information, Technology
and the Arts
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Via email: cita.reps@aph.gov.au

Dear Sir/Madam,

**Submission to the Australian House of Representatives House Standing
Committee on Communications, Information, Technology and the Arts
Inquiry into Community Broadcasting**

2NCR FM is a generalist community radio station located in Lismore, New South Wales. It has a permanent broadcasting licence. Lismore is in the Rainbow Region of northern New South Wales, a very eclectic area. Partly because of this regional characteristic and partly because we have a generalist licence, 2NCR FM is itself quite eclectic.

Our volunteers and presenters range in age from fourteen to seventy and are drawn from all walks of life, including high school and university students, several retirees, small business owners and those in full or part time employment. We regularly attract new volunteers but we also know how to keep them. We have six current presenters that have been granted life membership of our association (over fifteen years continuous membership) with a handful that have been 2NCR FM presenters for over twenty years!

In August 1976, 2NCR FM was one of the first radio stations in Australia to be granted a community radio licence. We are celebrating 30 years on air in August this year, so it seems we are doing something right.

Since 2NCR FM's inception in 1976, station management has passed through several sets of "hands", starting with the then Northern Rivers College of Advanced Education, University of New England – Northern Rivers, Southern Cross University, and most recently North Coast Radio Inc, an independent incorporated association operated by members of the community of Lismore.

Our funding generally comes from sponsorship, Community Broadcasting Foundation and other grants, membership fees and donations. We have one part-time paid position (Station Manager/Technician) to ensure there is a consistent approach to day-to-day station management. All other positions are voluntary.

Our strengths

- 2NCR FM enjoys strong support from its members, volunteers and presenters. Having over fifty presenters enables us to have a presenter in our on-air studio from 6.00am to midnight six days a week and 7.30am to midnight on Sunday. This is an achievement that few other local stations, community or commercial, can boast. We use the Community Radio Network satellite service offered by the Community Broadcasting Association of Australia outside these hours.
- We offer a diverse range of musical genres and formats including country, jazz, blues, heavy metal, punk, golden memories, indigenous, world music, rock music, pop music, community issues, political issues, religious programming and ethnic language shows, much of which is not available on any other local radio station.
- As all but one of our staff are volunteers, we are able to provide our service for a fraction of the cost of a commercial radio station.
- A limit of five minutes sponsorship per hour for community radio stations provides a marked point of difference between 2NCR FM and the local commercial and quasi-commercial stations. We believe that this allows a much better listening experience for the listeners in our Licence Area Plan.
- We have nurtured a close relationship with several local high schools and Job Network providers. This allows us the opportunity to provide community radio training to between 5 and 10 work experience children and between 5 and 10 Work for the Dole people per year.

- Our ability to provide valuable exposure to new and up-and-coming Australian artists with airplay through the AMRAP project.
- Many radio listeners prefer community radio to commercial radio, as demonstrated by the McNair Ingenuity Research Community Radio survey published in 2004. The slick polished sound of commercial radio does not sit well with many radio consumers, especially in the Rainbow Region. This means community radio fills a very important gap - this is especially important in the age of networked commercial and government stations.
- As we focus on listeners in the Licence Area Plan allocated to us by the Australian Communication and Media Authority we are able to provide a locally focussed service with local news and events.

Our weaknesses

- The high cost of new technology relative to our turnover means we often can't afford to replace outdated equipment when we need to, or else we need to make do with second hand equipment.
- Our cash flow is occasionally more irregular than we would prefer.
- The Rainbow Region is an attractive area in which to live, so it has large numbers of people moving to the area. When taken together with the sizeable transient student population, this means we always need to be on the ball with promoting ourselves to new residents. Maintaining brand awareness is imperative.

Potential opportunities

- The introduction of digital radio - as the likely effect on us is such a big unknown it has also been included in this submission as a threat.
- As our raison d'être is not making a profit for shareholders, we are able to make local programming decisions based on what is best for our local community.
- The new funding allocated by the Community Broadcasting Foundation for training will allow us the opportunity to provide a higher level of technical and management training to our volunteers; training which can also help in other areas of their lives – either in other volunteer positions or may help them secure paid employment.

- Having a relatively small budget means we are often required to come up with innovative ideas that cost much less, but are still as effective as the commercial solution.
- The chance to provide “ordinary” people (that quite often turn out to be extraordinary given the chance) with exposure to an industry sometimes portrayed as being elitist.
- The opportunity to strengthen community participation in the functioning of their community and therefore help to cement community ties.
- The ability to broadcast our service online and podcast certain programs would increase our reach to the listeners in our Licence Area Plan.
- The potential to work closely with other community radio stations in our area to build synergy and common brand awareness. Our transmission footprints overlap to an extent, but each community radio station in the area generally caters to a different demographic, so much potential exists for synergy through cooperation.
- The purchase of new OB facilities would enable us to broadcast live from our bus during emergencies. Lismore suffers frequent flood emergencies so this would be invaluable to our community. Local commercial and government stations have been known to broadcast scheduled networked programs during emergencies, leaving a significant gap in local coverage.
- Larger premises would allow us extra space where we could interact more closely with other community organisations.

Potential threats

- The introduction of digital radio – as the likely effect on us is such a big unknown it has also been included in this submission as an opportunity.
- Although the support from our volunteers is very passionate, as is the case with most voluntary organisations these days, everybody is very busy and over committed and sometimes we lose in the battle of competing interests.
- Occasionally volunteers or presenters need to be replaced immediately if they need to move away, say for employment reasons, and it is often hard to find another volunteer with the same specific skill set immediately.
- The perception that as a community station we may offer less of a listening experience. In fact, the opposite is generally true, mainly due to fewer promotional announcements and greater musical diversity.
- Being able to afford the equipment and premises that we need to cater for our large number of presenters and volunteers.

- Due to our relatively low budget, we are unable to afford certain backup equipment; equipment that commercial and government radio stations would take for granted.

2NCR FM is a couple of years into its renewal phase following the upheaval created by Southern Cross University withdrawing funding and relinquishing its broadcasting licence in 1999. Our cash flow has now stabilised and we are looking towards the future with much hope. We are very happy with where we stand in the community and (generally) with the direction in which community radio is heading.

We do however have a few closing comments and wishes for the future:

- We would hope that there would be more interaction between the community, government and commercial radio sectors in the future. There is some interaction, but it seems mostly to be underground and unrecognised. On the most part we are not competing for the same audiences, as suggested by the McNair Ingenuity Research Community Radio survey published in 2004. There is much that each sector could learn from the others, and more recognition should be given to the excellent training ground that community radio provides for commercial and government radio staff. Much could be gained by joining forces to promote ourselves against other forms of communication and media.
- Our main wish for the future is to continue to be self sufficient operationally with most of our funding coming from sponsorship, membership and donations, with the occasional grant covering costly items such as new transmission equipment and other new technology, as well as sector wide needs such as management and technical training.
- That we remain as community minded as we are. We believe that we are passing on important life skills to some of those that need it most: responsibility, how to work with others and that money is not the most important consideration in life.

We believe that community broadcasting provides a much-needed service in this day and age when everything else is rush, rush, rush and it seems no one does anything for nothing any more – well, we do.

Should you require any further information or clarification on the above, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely,

Jason Tickle
President.