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Won't get fooled again: Radio journalism and the birth of community radio

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Won't get fooled again:

The 25th anniversary of radical radio in Queensland

Some of the radio "firsts" for 4ZZZ-FM include:

- The first FM Stereo rock music station in Australia (yes Virginia, well before the then 2JJ went FM Stereo)
- The first FM Stereo station in Queensland
- The first mass-audience format (contemporary/popular music, news/current affairs and information) Public Broadcaster in Australia
- The first Public Broadcaster in Australia with AJA accredited journalists
- The first station in the world to play The Saints, The Go Betweens, and a host of great Brisbane bands.

John Stanwell (2000)

Brisbane's 4 ZZZ FM was built on the idea that news and information are part of a wider cultural package presented to audiences. The station emerged to fill a creative and intellectual gap left by what were seen as the inadequacies of commercial radio and the conservatism of public sector broadcasting. These "generation gaps" became particularly apparent in the sixties; a period of significant political and social change throughout the western world. While television showed glimpses of a revolutionary package that included rock music, drug culture, and left politics, mainstream Australian media seemed locked into an older more unquestioning world.

4ZZZ went to air as 4ZZ at noon on December 8, 1975 to the sound of the British rock band the Who's song, "Won't Get Fooled Again". A collective of students and unemployed, leavened with a few communist tradesmen and the occasional academic, had created something entirely new in Australian broadcasting.

Educate, agitate and organise!

ZZZ is an access radio station and needs/wants you to criticise our programming. You can produce your own show. Feed us ideas, smut, rumours, anything you feel should be investigated. Your confidentiality is guaranteed! (*Radio Times*: 1976. Vol 1 Number 5. P 7)

4 ZZZ grew from idealism of the radical student movement of the 1960's. The movement's ideology was that of the New Left; a critical, democratic movement with its origins in the radical, non

communist Students for Democratic Society which had emerged in Californian universities.

Television and press reports of the movement's activities in the United States found a ready audience in Australia.

In Queensland, the movement's growth was linked to new media as well as new critiques of society. The introduction of the small offset printing press allowed the publication of daily newsletters, which could be distributed to thousands of students and staff at University of Queensland and, less often, at workplaces and public events. The publications promoted issues such as draft resistance; the campaign against foreign involvement in the Vietnam war; gerrymander in the Queensland electoral system; and the lack of civil liberties in Queensland, particularly issues concerned with freedom of speech. The movement had adopted the tactics of the US civil rights movement and challenged state laws restricting political assembly by staging illegal demonstrations. (More than three hundred students were arrested in a single demonstration supporting civil liberties in 1967). John Stanwell, a sixties student activist, whose politics shifted from the small "I" end of the Liberal Party to oppose conscription, said that while Brisbane was geographically isolated, its young people were increasingly influenced by global political and cultural changes:

The whole range of cultural and political issues world wide developed in the 60's, with the social and sexual freedom coming from the pill. But primarily two political threads: one was a sort of a broad civil liberties you-can-do-anything kind of thing which ended up being quite important in Queensland because of the reaction of the Government, and then the other one was around a specific political issue which was the sending of troops to Vietnam. (Stanwell:2000)

In 1968, in an attempt to reach a wider public, the student radical movement published an "underground newspaper" called *Brisbane Line*. The paper was produced before computerised story production, editing and layout. It had to be hand typed, adjusted by a manual compositor, laid out using glue and paper, scanned and printed on a single sheet, flat bed printer located at the headquarters of the Queensland Communist Party. Each edition had to be hand stapled together. Since newsagents frequently refused to sell the papers, *Brisbane Line* then had to be sold on the streets. Street sellers could be subject to harassment and arrest. *Brisbane Line* ceased publication after only three issues.

Jim Beatson was one of the printers, that is offset printers, of the student left and he was probably the only one who actually got out of it relatively sane. They had the most shitty job of all because they basically started when everyone else finished and then worked right through the night and had to then have the material ready for distributing the next day and many attempts to – they wanted to be a little more creative, to do something more than just a leaflet - were floundered on distribution... I mean the newspapers were sort of hard enough as it was to

produce, but then what happens is they'd be driven around in people's cars for weeks because everyone hated distribution ... (Stanwell:2000)

Demonstrations against a range of issues; the Vietnam war, racism, the state gerrymander and civil liberties continued throughout this period. A combination of naive press relations, a conservative *Courier Mail* dominated media, press gallery reliance on government handouts, did not result in what the left student movement considered to be favourable press coverage.

In 1971, the students mobilised against a visit by the South African Springbok Rugby Union team. The Bjelke Petersen Government backed the team, proclaiming support for the white controlled South African apartheid government . -

When they marched this time, the Premier declared a State of Emergency, suspended civil liberties, ringed the rugby field with barbed wire and called up more than 600 police from country areas. The protests were to be broken up by force...Arrests went on all week, but the demonstrators would not give up. To avoid confrontations, they changed tactics and chose instead to gather peacefully on the footpath opposite the hotel where the Springboks were staying, the Tower Mill. They sang 'We shall overcome'. The police waited until dusk when they called in the riot squad to baton charge the anti-apartheid demonstrators off the hill. A correspondent covering the tour for the *London Times* reported that people were kicked and punched by police as they tried to escape. The local media carried State government news releases praising the police. (KNIGHT, 1985:5).

Much of Queensland University was closed by a staff and student strike. Students staged an occupation of the Students Union complex where a printing press was established. At the time Queensland law made it illegal to circulate printed material without a permit, unless the material contained advertising or religious matters. There were hundreds of arrests during the university strike. Once again the available communications technology proved inadequate to the task of circulating the views of those being arrested. At the meeting called at the Students Union Relaxation Block to review the anti Springbok campaign, the left collective began considering radio as an alternative means of communicating.

Politics and Culture

Have you noticed how identical and predictable the commercial news services are? Are you disappointed with the way the existing news services shirk their responsibilities to the listening public by avoiding controversy? There are numerous local pressure groups in the community who receive very little coverage in the media, and that which is given trivialises the issues and distorts their position in the political spectrum. The mass media thrives [sic] on the perpetuation of myths. (*Radio Times*: 1975/76. Vol. 1. Number 1 P 4)

Queensland was often seen as a conservative bastion in the sixties and early seventies; caricatured by journalists as “the deep north”. The state had been ruled since 1959 by a Country Party led coalition. A gerrymander of electorates not only locked Labor reformists out of power; it guaranteed that most of the ruling MP’s came from culturally isolated rural communities outside the state capital, Brisbane. The former led state government imposed censorship of books and movies, sought to control publications including leaflets, banned political demonstrations, refused Sunday trading and declared indigenous people “protected” aborigines who could be subject to detention without trial, forced removal and seizure of assets. (Whitton: 1989)

Government ministers sought to deflect criticisms of police and political corruption, by encouraging vigorous police action against their “radical” critics. (A former member of the State Special Branch [political police], Don Lane, was elected to parliament on a “Law and Order” platform and promoted to the ministry before being jailed for corruption.)

In a bid to challenge social and political conservatism, the left student movement allied itself with the Queensland branch of the Australian Communist Party to create a club, Foco, which met every Sunday night at Brisbane Trades Hall. In 1968, Foco offered a heady mix of poetry, cinema, book readings, rock music and ultra left politics. Brian Laver, a student activist who had been employed briefly as a Trades Hall research officer, proposed a club for “radical working class youth and students involved in the anti Viet Nam struggle”:

Most people were fairly tired at that time after the civil liberties struggles and the early anti Vietnam War struggles. So we were looking for both a bit of easy R and R where people could meet socially and culturally and form alliances which might lead to a concentration of political forces... When we set Foco up, the National party launched an attack on it in Hansard, describing it as a den of iniquity and radicalism. They never caught onto the fact that the word Foco was from Che Guevara’s book. It means guerilla encampment. (Laver: 2000)

While attracting more than 500 hundred people to its weekly meetings, Foco was forced to close after a conservative MP sparked a press campaign claiming that it was a distribution centre for illegal drugs. However, Foco’s fusion of politics and culture inspired activists influenced by the American “counter culture”, to create a home grown group, HARPO (How About Resisting Powerful Organisations):

With HARPO, we had the full gamut. We ran a newspaper which came out occasionally which I guess harked back to the *Brisbane Line* and those other kind of papers. We ran a restaurant, Mr Naturals. We ran a food co-op, Whole Foods, and we ran what started out as a street theatre group which had grown out of *Romp*, its predecessor, and turned into HARPO’s Night Out which were the predecessors of the [ZZZ’s fund raising] Joint Effort. And we basically brought bands up from Melbourne or Sydney, particularly Melbourne which we had a close allegiance to, to Brisbane. We would do a piece of theatre with a political theme that was actually

presented with the main band kind of coming in behind us. So there was this quite a crossover between the local political sort of end of it and the fairly populist kind of pop music/rock music culture side of it. (Stanwell: 2000)

HARPO activists took over most arts activities positions with the University of Queensland Students Union and subsequently became involved in planning for the 1973 Aquarius festival which established the alternative cultural capital at Nimbin in northeastern New South Wales. After the festival, HARPO members including John Stanwell returned to Brisbane to become involved in the creation of 4ZZZ.

On Air

The overground media tend to be equivocal, legalistic and very much influenced by financial considerations - an unavoidable situation in the context of a rip off culture where the newsreader pleads with the listener to buy specific products between crises. The underground is determined by 'alternative society' standards and concerns itself with truth, idealism and sedition.

Roger Lewis, *Outlaws of America : The underground press and its context*. (Lewis: 1972, 173)

Radio provided a cost effective outlet for music, drama, and comedy. Radical radio journalists could meanwhile concentrate on news gathering instead of labour intensive newspaper distribution. Broadcasting eliminated much of the repetitive manual work associated with underground newspapers. The technology was simple and relatively cheap Most people had radio receivers. The medium was regulated by the federal government rather than the more conservative Bjelke Petersen state government.

A pirate radio station was initially proposed, mirroring the British experiments from ships anchored in the English Channel. However, broadcasts in Brisbane would have to be made from the suburbs, exposing the pirate broadcasters to lengthy jail terms provided under the Posts and Telegraphs Act. The election of a reformist Labor government in 1972 had given the student radicals hope that a station might be established permanently and legally.

Jim Beatson, a student activist, proposed that the groups seek a broadcasting license for a station, which could operate twenty four hours a day, seven days a week. The new station would borrow ideas from the counter culture; the politicised hippie movement which identified the political assumptions underpinning popular culture.

The proposed radio station had explicitly political aims:

- To provide an alternative source of information to that which was provided by the mainstream media;
- To provide a training ground for other people so that they could acquire skills outside the mainstream, that would allow them access to the mainstream;
- To demystify the media;
- To broadcast Australian music.

FM broadcasting which allowed high fidelity, stereo transmissions was selected as the preferred medium. But this meant that the group had to first launch a campaign for FM itself to be introduced. They wrote a submission to the federal government, criticising media concentration in Australia and the similarity of programming across radio stations that broadcasted formats such as talkback, easy listening or popular music. Beatson argued in the submission that “an FM station has to provide fresh voices for broadcasting, not high fidelity versions of existing voices.”

I bought an FM radio in Britain and when I brought it back to Australia I couldn't use it. There had been mono FM experiments by the ABC in the early sixties but after that very little. It was better quality than AM and it was available in stereo. This occurred at the same time as the hi fi boom. So anyone who had been to Europe, or America or Britain was well aware of FM. (Beatson:2000)

While most other potential community broadcasters believed that their role was confined to broadcasting to a minority audience, ZZZ argued that there were significant audiences unhappy with the limited choice offered public and commercial radio.

ZZZ sought to reach the broadest possible audience and to expose its listeners to new music, opinions and culture. The group organised a letter writing campaign, requesting community groups to contact the Media Minister, and supporting the proposed changes. The group lobbied against an industry proposal the frequency modulation (FM) band be located in the UHF band instead of the internationally accepted VHF band. Beatson argued that UHF receivers would have to be specially and expensively manufactured in Australia; excluding much of the low-income youth audience:

There were two important features of our group and submission that enhanced our credibility. Firstly we were talking about something that virtually no one else was raising - that mass audiences were dissatisfied with commercial stations because of restricted play lists, too many commercials etc. Other submissions rested on the assumptions that majority tastes were content with existing radio and stressed the need for minority tastes to be catered for ie classical music, ethnic groups, educators etc. Secondly our group was particularly strong in one area where most other public broadcasting groups were weak (with the exception of MBS in Sydney) - the

technical side of broadcasting.... This was clearly of importance because of the influence that the engineering staff of these various governmental agencies enjoy, (*Radio Times*: 1976 Vol 1. Number 4. P 4).

The federal Labor government responded positively but acted slowly.

While Labor deliberated over the issuing of licences, it became clear that Whitlam's time in office was running out. ZZZ continued to pressure Media Minister Moss Cass into issuing the licences while Labor was still in power "as the personal records of those at the station were such that the Conservatives would never give us a licence." Cass was sympathetic to the public broadcasting movement. His decision to issue twelve licences was pushed through in August 1975, but without any appropriate provision under the existing Acts.

Three weeks prior to the proposed opening date, the Whitlam Government was dismissed by the Governor General, creating a constitutional crisis. The licence application was referred to a caretaker government. However, the acting Postmaster General, Peter Nixon, decided in this case that Labor's policies would be upheld, effectively giving ZZZ the go ahead.

In view of this, the station employed Ross Dannecker, John Stanwell and myself to begin the amazing and arduous task of building the station, transmitter, employing staff, raising money, producing call signs, liasing with various government bodies - the list was virtually endless. A former architecture student, the dynamic Kevin Hayes, led a group of largely volunteer labour to build the station...all accomplished in eight weeks!
(*Radio Times*:: 1976. V1. Number 5. P3).

Enthusiastic volunteers cleared and demolished the top floor of the University of Queensland Students Union complex before it was realised that the floor could not take the weight of the proposed studio construction. Abandoning the wreckage, they finally settled on the bare concrete basement of the Refectory extension where engineering students previously held "smokos": all male beer drinking sessions with topless dancers and bottomless kegs. Material was donated or "borrowed", including a grand piano which was found at the back of the nearby Schannel theatre.

We had built two studios, with the thought that we might even record stuff and a grand piano might be a good thing. Fifteen people carried it around and then we built a brick wall around it. I don't think they ever used it. The poor old piano had a hard life. (Hayes:2000)

The first announcers were among those who laid the bricks to construct the studios.

We bought bricks and we mixed concrete and everybody learned to lay bricks. I remember a woman riding in on a motorbike, a trailbike, smoking a pipe, Margot Foster. She ended up becoming a producer at the ABC some years later. She rolled

up and said she'd heard about us and she was keen to help and she was willing to lay bricks - she was a bloody good bricklayer too, Margot. And so in building a dream we would meet every night and have dinner and talk about how mighty the station was going to be. (Beatson:2000)

Organisation

The station began with a paid staff of about a dozen people who worked in studios equipped with home hi fi standard equipment. The decision to employ such a large staff, albeit at token wages equal to unemployment payments, required substantial and continuing fund raising. There were also significant costs involved in establishing an extensive record library. As a mark of independence, the station collective decided against seeking advertising revenue; hoping to cover costs through donations from student unions, membership fees and by staging musical events known as Joint Efforts. Margot Foster said the Joint Efforts were run by station staff and volunteers, who acted as door keepers, presenters, bouncers, promoters and bar workers:

They were big events which came to a pretty provincial town of the time. The Joint Efforts gave the young people of Brisbane the opportunity to come to a venue which they felt ownership of. It was their sort of music, their sort people and and presented by their contemporaries. It was alternative and a little bit radical. The political message was always expressed at the time. They were defiant....If there was a political issues of moment going on, it was always presented.(Foster:2000)

ZZZ subscribers received discounts from sympathetic businesses, were sent copies of the ZZZ newsletter, *Radio Times*, and were encouraged to take part in regular fund raising Radiothons.

To satisfy the station's radical and democratic origins, policy was decided at a weekly meeting of all staff. Anyone who contributed to the station could attend and help decide the debate. While such a unique system of management could result in factionalism, new ideas and new programs were encouraged. Bill Riner said the station provided his first and last experience of democratic management:

The general running of the radio station was a simple idea called democracy. We had a meeting, the staff members had a vote, an issue was raised, it was canvassed, and there was lobbying done amongst the full-timers, and I think the staff was in numbers of twelve, I think that's what we had, full time people or paid staff. There was a lot of politicking going on but it seemed to me to be a very fairly run organization and it really was, in respect of making decisions, getting issues up, just individual contact, At the station meeting each week, new material, new business would be brought up and we would vote on things. It was as simple as that. (Riner: 2000)

News and Current Affairs

The ZZZ newsroom wants to demystify...wants to fuel radical ground swells, wants to force other media to open their eyes wants to make listeners WANT to hear a black tribal leader cry over a destroyed heritage, wants to defeat the censorship that exists under our libel laws.

Rob Cameron, 4 ZZZ journalist (Cameron: 1976)

Many commercial radio stations, then as now, carried little investigative news or current affairs, relying on material inspired by the daily newspapers' agenda. In Brisbane in the early seventies, all five commercial radio stations received most of their news from Australian Associated Press which processed Queensland newspapers copy, sent it to Sydney for editing and returned it to Brisbane for ripping and reading.

4 ZZZ attempted to offer local perspectives which it believed were ignored by the mainstream stations. In the station's early years, information provided by ZZZ's newsroom had a high profile within the station's format. A current affairs program, Brisbane Line, was launched in February 1976, on Sunday afternoons offering, a mixture of news, live interviews, pre-recorded reports and entertainment items.

In addition to daily headlines, the newsroom produced interviews and information segments which were interspersed throughout normal programming as well as current affair program blocks. The station chose not to subscribe to syndicated news services such as AAP or Reuters. Unfortunately plagiarism, ironically from *Courier Mail* headlines, became a way of life. However this information was combined with details from other radio and independent sources as well as their own brief analysis. Margot Foster lived on the dole while working as a volunteer journalist in the ZZZ newsroom:

We were able to be more straight forward [than the mainstream media]. We allowed ourselves to be biased. I had no background in journalism and no formal training. I was quite oblivious to a code of practice. Others like Lindy Woodward [later JJJ's information Executive Producer] and Sean Hoyt [researcher on Four Corners' Moonlight State] did have understanding, which is probably why they were paid staff. If you were angry about something, it was a forum to say it. Balance wasn't an issue at all. It was really giving you a platform for something that hadn't been heard anywhere else. I was able to comment on the issues of the time. I got radio training, which for me was significant, because that is where I stayed. (Hayes: 2000)

Issues covered included environmental affairs, aboriginal land rights, strikes, prisoners' rights, abuse of state power, corruption and women's rights. While the rest of the media may have reported Brisbane's demonstrations as "the excesses of police and militants" ZZZ continued to canvass the issues at the heart of such demonstrations. (LICENCE APPLICATION, 1978:14.14).

In 1976, Queensland police launched a military style raid on a hippie encampment at Cedar Bay north of Cairns. Using a helicopter, a naval patrol boat and four wheel drives they rounded up the members of the isolated community. Finding only a small quantity of marijuana, the police burned down the

hippie's houses before they left. ZZZ broke what would become an international story. Reports were sent from Cairns to ZZZ and the issue was consequently adopted by the ABC which initiated an Australia-wide 'campaign for justice', giving ZZZ a nation-wide reputation, and credence to their news service. For the first time other media in Australia were coming to ZZZ for information and using contacts established by the station. By the end of 1976, four police were indicted on criminal charges arising from the raid as a consequence of the media campaign initiated by ZZZ and its role as central organiser of the various groups involved in the campaign. (4ZZZ LICENCE APPLICATION, 1978:14.16).

Programming

The music that was being played [before ZZZ] was a very narrow band of music. There was so much music excluded. Anything that was not released on a single, well they wouldn't even consider it. But there was a crying out for a wider diversity of music and if you stayed up late at night, you could pick up JJ coming in from Sydney on the AM Band so we used to do that just to get our music fix. (Riner:2000)

Most commercial broadcasters ignored the more sophisticated contemporary music and offered top forty play lists dominated by heavily promoted, usually foreign "singles"; forty five revolution per minute acetate disks. Country stations played country music. ABC broadcasts seemed to be a mixture of parliament, classical music and cricket. Even the album tracks produced by popular sixties groups like the Beatles or the Rolling Stones were not regularly broadcast. Community radio sought to provide alternatives.

Bill Riner, currently the ABC's national network programmer, had been employed in commercial radio while moonlighting with the Z's. Riner said that Brisbane commercial radio of the sixties and early seventies lacked diversity:

We were an alternative to what was going on the commercial radio stations ... Eclectic is the only way to put it. With each broadcaster that came on the air, each presenter, there was a particular individual idiosyncrasy musically that they would bring to the table. (Riner:2000)

4 ZZZ adopted rock music as the main content of its musical programming in an attempt to corner Brisbane's alternative youth market which it believed was still largely ignored by the commercial stations. The idea was to program rock music album tracks while injecting current affairs and news material into the music shows. Programs were controlled by a program co-ordinator. The concept of

format programming was borrowed from public radio stations in the United States. Formatting combined a number of desirable elements for programming (in ZZZ's case it is contemporary youth, music, news and current affairs) which created an overall identity for the station. It then followed that an audience could tune in to the station at any given time with an expectation of the broad style of the station's sound. Most other Australian public radio stations subsequently opted for block programming, (such as 2SER FM where Blocks of airtime were sold to ethnic and other groups).

Conclusion

The creation of 4 ZZZ was a response to Queensland's political and cultural conservatism. It was intended to be a challenge to the state's dominant political and social paradigms. The station was a product of the Queensland student left groups, which were in turn part of international media driven socio-political reform movements. The station pioneered the broadcasting of contemporary Australian music which is now common on commercial and ABC airwaves. It attempted but not always achieved independent and critical news.

ZZZ helped create a more diverse and responsive radio sector. By the year 2000, there were more than 130 community radio stations operating in Australia. They ranged in size from NAG FM a loose community based group broadcasting from the Yeppoon High School to 2 SER FM which broadcasts seven days a week, twenty four hours a day with hundreds of volunteer workers. Under the legislation administered by the Australian Broadcasting Authority, non profit groups such as local music enthusiasts, church organisations, unions, student bodies could apply for a licence which permits them to broadcast music, news and a limited amount of advertising.

ZZZ can be seen to be most successful in its aim to train people for the mainstream media. Former staff can be found at JJJ, ABC News and Current Affairs, the press and in television. To that extent it has helped de-mystify media processes. Kevin Hayes said that ZZZ showed it was possible to come up with a good idea and act on it.

When I think that ZZZ has survived for twenty five years and has been passed from hand to hand in that time and it still lives, I think it's a fabulous thing. It's guardians are still getting born. When John Woods first played that record, "Won't get fooled again", we felt that we had achieved something which was almost un-do-able. It made me feel we could do what we wanted to do, not just play by the rules. (Hayes:2000)

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