

The Importance of Locally-Owned Media

by Jim Beatson, founding coordinator of FM radio station 4ZZZ, Brisbane.

The *Echo Doco – Born To Be Trouble* is an excellent, new, fun, 81 minute documentary (available for \$28 from the Echo offices or online www.sharonshostak.com) which looks at the history of Australia's best loved and most successful locally-owned newspaper. *The Byron Shire Echo* (founded in 1986) grew out of local media indifference to a local police drug bust. Many people believed that the police were acting aggressively and illegally, and local TV and print media refused to touch the story. Likewise 4ZZZ (born in December 1975) largely grew out of local media indifference to State Government corruption, violence, incompetence and insensitivity in the late '60s and early '70s.

4ZZZ played a transforming role in Queensland through providing research for the *Four Corners* edition, "The Moonlight State", a pivotal event in bringing down the Bjelke-Petersen Government, one of 4ZZZ's many unstated aims.

The Echo's policy of exposing the close relationship between developers and Byron Shire's then pro-developer council, led to the election of a succession of minority Green Councils who have been in power for over a decade. As a result, Byron, uniquely among Australia's major tourism destinations, has a policy of preventing high rise over three stories in the Byron's CBD and over two stories elsewhere within Byron Shire.

The similarities between the Echo and 4ZZZ are fundamental. Both sets of founders believed that the secret of success lay in engaging with business and government in the serious job of daily reporting, not the lazy whining from the sidelines which is the stance of many small publications and community radio stations, or just regurgitating media releases provided to newsrooms. Each were loved because they stood firm, fought hard, and focussed equally on being entertaining and having fun.

The Echo's problems lay in keeping the advertisers happy while engaging in interventionist journalism. They were lucky that by the time developer interests, including real estate companies, planned on withdrawing their advertising, the Echo's other advertisers were as solid as its readership.

Sadly the Echo's two attempts at replicating its success with the *Lismore Echo*, and very recently the *Tweed Echo*, had both failed by the start of 2012. From my perspective they failed not just because they were imperial attempts at setting a local agenda away from their Byron base, but more importantly because local sentiment (both in strength and numbers) that powered the *Byron Echo* was not present in Lismore. In the Tweed, many businesses who were worried about being associated with the paper's perceived 'anti-developer' editorial stance, withdrew their advertising. Unlike Byron shire, other business advertisers and the community were not there in large enough numbers to support the paper.

4ZZZ was lucky in getting on top of all its troubles during its first five hectic years. From its inception, 4ZZZ-FM (which started life in December 1975 as 4ZZ-FM) was envisioned as a product of Brisbane's extraordinary radical movement.

While some of Brisbane's well-known ideologues rushed off to promote their individual 'revolutionary' anarchist or Trotskyist religions, 4ZZZ's antecedents came from the majority activists of the period who engaged in a number of overwhelmingly successful reformist groups: Women's House, Popular Theatre Troupe, Video Access Centre, the Cane Toad Times and ToadShow, CAMP (Campaign Against Moral Persecution), the Bowen Hills Anti-Freeway Campaign, Children By Choice, Queensland Conservation Council, La Boite Theatre, Queensland Council For Civil Liberties and others I apologise for missing.

4ZZZ's founders believed they had on-air presenters who knew more about music than those on commercial radio, comedians who were funnier than those on commercial radio, and reporters who were superior in every way to those employed by commercial radio. We believed we could beat commercial radio at their own game in winning a big audience.

We also knew that the subscriber-driven dream (today it would be called our 'business plan') was only financially possible if 4ZZZ could be heard throughout the greater metropolitan area. Because of the technical realities of FM broadcasting, this meant the station had to transmit on high power 10kW ERP (Effective Radiated Power) from Mt Coot-tha.

By mid-1975, it was clear the Whitlam Government would soon offer the Qld. Uni. Student Union-based 4ZZZ group a Brisbane-wide 10kW licence.

The Sydney-based Media Department's Working Party on Public Broadcasting (whose appointees worked full time for two months) were tasked with producing a policy for developing public broadcasting. I was one of its seven members. The Working Party had been set up quickly to get on with the job of determining how the new sector would be established, funded and regulated including technical and broadcasting standards, because everyone knew Labor was probably living on borrowed time. Through working there I discovered Whitlam's Media Minister, Moss Cass, was impressed by 4ZZZ's lobbying and agreed we should be granted a licence as soon as possible.

In late June, the Working Party's Report was tabled in Parliament. Pushed by the 4ZZZ lobby, UQ's Student Union took the plunge and ordered a high-power transmitter and antenna from the US.

Within a few weeks of the Working Party Report being tabled, Minister Cass named twelve potential licences that would be offered to twelve Universities. Only one, 4ZZZ, was offered, not to the University like the other eleven, but to the Student Union. And while all twelve quickly said 'yes please', only 4ZZZ was close to being ready to broadcast. But it was an offer of a licence, not an actual licence. The sloth in handing over licences was due to conflict between three Government Departments as to the legality of using the Wireless Telegraphy Act to issue the licences rather than the normal Broadcast Act, since this act made no provision for FM radio services. This bureaucratic/legal debate was to cost 4ZZZ dearly.

By mid-October the writing was on the wall that if an election was called in the crisis atmosphere caused by the Opposition denying the Whitlam Government's money supply, Whitlam was certain to loose. 4ZZZ tried to hurry the arrival of the high-power transmitter and antenna but were told by the supplier it was lost on the New York docks. Given the atmosphere of the time it may be that ASIO and/or the CIA helped in losing them, but who knows? Things do get lost.

What to do? 4ZZZ's campaigners agreed that we should not commence broadcasting on low power under a Liberal/Country Party Coalition Government while waiting for our new transmitter to arrive. We believed once 4ZZZ showed its hand on-air at low power we would never be granted a full-power licence.

But within weeks we were faced with that dilemma when the Governor General sacked Whitlam and appointed the Malcolm Fraser-led Coalition as Caretaker Government until new elections could be held approximately four weeks later. And we had neither licence nor transmitter.

So after a lot of soul searching, 4ZZZ decided to go to air on a home-made transmitter broadcasting from an antenna on a tower atop the Schonell Theatre (barely above sea level). Consequently, the station could only be heard clearly in the nearby suburbs close to the university (Indooroopilly, Toowong, West End, etc.). Too small an area for us to generate an audience base to support our ambitious income generation plans: memberships; 4ZZZ events; sponsorships (advertising). Yes you could hear 4ZZZ almost anywhere in Brisbane but only if listeners purchased an expensive radio and antenna. So the decision to start broadcasting was very difficult.

While awaiting the licence and the election I was rung in confidence by a former Working Party Member (now a senior figure in the regulatory authority) to say that although the Fraser Caretaker Government was required to implement all decisions made by the Whitlam Government prior to, but not after, the election, we were not going to get a licence. Which prompted the thought – if we were not going to get a licence what about the other eleven? I rang all eleven. The two closest to being able to broadcast were the Lismore group who became 2NCR, and the Newcastle group which became 2NUR. Both were very concerned although still six months away from their planned start up dates. 2NCR was in Deputy Prime

Minister Doug Anthony's electorate and Anthony had promised Lismore their University would soon have a licence. Doug Anthony turned out to be the all-star who successfully demanded Whitlam's licence-promise decision be implemented.

So the regulatory authority offered 4ZZZ a 1kW licence to broadcast from the Student Union-owned Schonell Theatre as two engineers, Ross Dannecker and Dave Aberdeen, worked day and night on a small transmitter and antenna and another volunteer building team worked quickly on building three studios in the basement of the University Refectory building. This team was led by architecture student, Kevin Hayes, with his second I.C., Don Little, plus a couple of brickies from the Building Workers Industrial Union of Australia. They lead a team of all-volunteer amateur builders. And err, that's after removing two walls in the Student Union Building's first floor before discovering its floor would not support the weight of soundproof cavity-brick walls.

We began broadcasting on 8 December 1975 with twelve full-time staff on \$100 per week and a great many volunteers.

Days later as 4ZZZ's Station Coordinator, I was secretly rung by another former Working Party member to say he had seen the extensive ASIO police records of 4ZZZ's staff on the Minister's desk. He told me I was certainly finished and possibly the station as well.

Some days later we were officially told that a senior Government staffer was coming to Brisbane to check us out. Today it is hard to imagine that this would mean very much, but in the poisonous atmosphere in Canberra at the time it was clear I had to go and we needed to look like clean skins. Ross Dannecker was appointed Station Coordinator, though in name only.

4ZZZ survived the visit. However with frequent, bitter, angry debates within the station as to what strategy should be adopted to get 4ZZZ to high power. Part of one strategy (which I supported along with a majority of the station's paid and volunteer workers) was to lay low politically while trying to get the high-powered licence.

A smaller faction within our group didn't agree with this approach. Some published personal attacks against those they didn't agree with in the traditional journals of the time. Regrettably, the differences got quite personal.

Some in the minority faction were not very creative or experienced with radio and the majority felt these programs were often crude, and/or technically inept, and/or preachy. On some occasions, presenters about to go to air after a particularly bitter exchange at a meeting went to the studio in tears.

Within a few months, Denis Reinhardt, a former QUT Student Union President and 4ZZZ volunteer journalist, now a controversial media owner and failed businessman, but then a smart, passionate, energetic, creative fixer with a strong commitment to honest journalism, became Station Coordinator. Reinhardt brought stability to the station and used his carpentry skills to build a proper newsroom. With a poor income stream, its full-time staff cut their own wages to (from memory) \$30 per week.

The high-powered transmitter finally arrived and literally grew cobwebs in its packing case sitting in the station's foyer for five years.

Towards the end of the 1970s, the Fraser Government decided Whitlam's regulatory authority, the Broadcasting Control Board headed by strong 4ZZZ supporter, Dr Geoff Evans (who had officially opened Triple Z) was so white-anted by progressives it had to be replaced by a new Australian Broadcasting Tribunal.

Who should head up the ABT? Fraser decided to choose the golden boy of Australian Television, Bruce Gyngell, who previously had taken TCN 9 to the top of the ratings pole, and then he switched to Channel 7 and did the same thing. After that, Gyngell moved to England to head up the Breakfast Television channel. Presumably unbeknownst to Prime Minister Fraser, who was then a fierce conservative (totally unlike his latter day conversion to small 'l' liberalism), Gyngell was undergoing a similar but much earlier transformation while in England. He returned to Australia to head the ABT, a committed macro-biotic vegetarian and small 'l' liberal.

Meanwhile the Prime Ministerial aspirations of Queensland's notorious, hardline Premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen were becoming problematic for the Libs federally, and Joh's ultra-conservative views were giving conservatism a bad smell.

By the time the ABT called for applications for the newly created permanent public-broadcasting licences for Brisbane, the successor to Denis Reinhardt as 4ZZZ Station Coordinator, was former Sydney University radical, Haydn Thompson. Haydn, together with a 4ZZZ staffer, Fiona McLeod, wrote a skillful application, and met and enjoyed the company of Bruce Gyngell. The issuing of the 10kW licence was a formality.

Aside from a few unfinished internal battles - during which both Haydn and I (newly returned from England to resume my old position) fell out over a number of major issues (we both resigned along with a couple of others) - the transition to high power went smoothly.

So by late 1980 a mostly new team of 4ZZZ workers arrived, many from south of the border, all with the same original vision, and the great Golden Era of 4ZZZ commenced. Among its most frequently cited happy moments, the station was charged with creating a major prison riot and for this coverage, 4ZZZ reporter, Jon Baird, received national awards. There were also Z reporters arrested over the SEQEB dispute. Then there was the almost daily 6am interview with Joh himself as he willingly, incoherently and confidently let ZZZ's listeners into his very strange thinking. Breakfast announcer, Michael Finucan, became celebrated as the nation's most hilariously acerbic radio presenter whose main challengers for the title came from within Z itself. To cap it off, 4ZZZ reporters did much of the research for the *Four Corners* television program "Moonlight State", which is generally credited with bringing down the Premier.

But that Golden Era came to an end around four years later when many of the station's staff decamped to Sydney either to work in print journalism, ABC radio, or most commonly JJJ where ex-Zed's become the dominant force for the next decade. Some even went to work for commercial FM. But Z was hit by real competition from both Sydney's JJJ when its broadcast was relayed to Brisbane and also from commercial FM arriving locally. The old Z staff was replaced by mostly younger people in a number of eras: first the strident feminists; then the well-meaning junkies; and finally less ambitious people who loved Brisbane and planned to spend their lives there.

The dynamic newsroom and comedy of old dwindled, although glimpses remain today. Z's successful survivors are its capable music-presenters but overall the station is a shadow of its former self.

By contrast, the beating heart of Byron, with its large activist population, is its newspaper, the Echo, which remains strong, ever present, committed, fair and fun.

End note: There have been many major infrastructure improvements undertaken by particular staff at 4ZZZ from 1990 to today which my piece fails to acknowledge. This and related issues will be addressed in a future article.

Jim Beatson

Addendum: Few people know of my late father Cliff's role in dislodging Joh. Cliff, as State Manager of Australia's dominant condom maker of the time, Ansell, had condom vending machines installed in Queensland University's toilets. The sight of police officers, on television and in newspapers, crow-baring the machines off the wall, under orders from Joh, to "*protect the morals of University students*", at the same time as a dozen 'illegal' brothels operated openly in Brisbane's Fortitude Valley section of Brisbane CBD, according to my dad, was the clincher. These brothels featured heavily in the *4 Corners* program "The Moonlight State", broadcast in May 1987.

http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/special_ed/masters/masters/default.htm