



# HITZ a knockout

**Mick Counihan, Senior Lecturer, Media Studies, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology**

Over the summer of 1993-94, an aspiring Melbourne community radio station, HITZ FM, conducted a test broadcast, providing a menu of dance pop music to a teenage audience for a period of ninety days. While most temporary transmissions come and go unremarked, HITZ made a spectacular impact. In ratings surveys, the station was responsible for the "Other FM" category increasing its audience share from 1.8 to 16.1 amongst 13-17 year olds, and from 3.3 to 12.8 amongst 18-24 year olds. As the shut-down date neared, HITZ and its supporters waged a vigorous and highly publicised, though ultimately unsuccessful, campaign to keep the station on air. While gaining predictable allies such as Molly Meldrum and AUSMUSIC, it also attracted support from less likely quarters, such as Victorian Premier Jeff Kennett and the then Shadow Minister for Communications, Senator Alston. HITZ has now returned to the pack of aspirant community broadcasters, conducting further temporary transmissions when available and awaiting finalisation of the planning process, when it can apply for a permanent community radio licence.

**D**uring HITZ FM's brief summer, the station made more difference to the life of its particular community than has occurred in Australian broadcasting since the appearance of SBS and indigenous services. Not only did HITZ pass every test devised for community radio aspirants, but in terms of cost/social benefit ratios, or of the relation between resources and outcomes, it was clearly far more economical, productive and socially useful than the TAB and tourist information services that seem to be the only fruits of the narrowcasting regime. At the time of its passing, the issue of the station's closure was overshadowed outside the Victorian media by more important developments occurring in communications policy and regulation. Nevertheless, it remains instructive to consider the relevance of the HITZ experience to the policy objectives articulated in the Broadcasting Services Act (the Act) and in *Creative Nation*.

## Broadcasting and diversity

The principle of maximising diversity has been a key goal of broadcasting policy for many years. While there is debate over how diversity can be calculated, it is beyond dispute that HITZ enhanced the diversity of radio services in the Melbourne area. Com-

mercial radio and the ABC's Triple J are aimed at older audiences. Other community stations provide some specialist shows that overlap the HITZ playlist, but dance music comprises only one of a number of genres block-programmed in their schedules.

---

**(HITZ) was clearly far more economical, productive and socially useful than the TAB and tourist information services that seem to be the only fruits of the narrowcasting regime**

---

The proof of the demand for a service like HITZ was its immediate and immense popularity in the largest and most diverse radio market in Australia.

## Access, localism and identity

HITZ had a clear conception of its role in the Melbourne media mix, namely: 'to broadcast new music, present information relevant to young people and develop a sense of identity among young people. With Melbourne's network affiliated commercial and national FM radio services, little is offered that is truly Melbourne oriented, and that creates an identity and a sense of belonging to young people in the city'.

The music it played was one ingredient in its success. The other was

that it was created by and for teenagers in Melbourne's suburban sprawl. The Australian Youth Foundation's national survey, *A Lost Generation* (1993), found young people bitter at their treatment by the media. They demanded 'a chance to speak for themselves and...a fairer representation of who they were, what they wanted to become and what they were contending with'. HITZ provided a youth-run news service, health and legal advice and information on activities such as under-age shows. As a conduit for horizontal information flows, it was an extension of the playground rather than of the classroom. Many young people were genuinely distressed when HITZ went off air because they felt that the station was theirs in a way that did not apply to other media.

## Broadcasting and Australian content

The problem of limited airplay opportunities for new Australian talent has been a long standing one. The ABT, after its major report into the issue, *Australian Music on Radio*, attempted unsuccessfully to require stations to give priority to new release material, records from independent labels and station-originated material. The Act abolished the 20% Australian music quota, shifting responsibility to a self-regulatory in-



## Temporary transmissions by aspirant community broadcasters

The purpose of temporary transmissions is to allow aspirant community broadcasting groups to develop radio operating skills and programming schedules and encourage community support for a permanent community broadcasting licence.

An aspirant community broadcaster may operate for a maximum of 30 days in its first year. After time time it must be off-air for at least an equivalent period of time. First-time applicants may broadcast for a maximum of 30 days in its first year. Subsequent transmissions, if approved by the ABA, may

operate for up to 90 days.

The ABA does not reserve channels specifically for temporary transmissions. Their availability therefore depends upon the number of vacant channels in an area, as well as the number of other users of vacant spectrum (including narrowcasters and other aspirant broadcasters).

Permanent community licences will be advertised and allocated by the ABA following completion of the planning process currently being undertaken throughout Australia.

A temporary transmission is consid-

ered an open narrowcast service operating under a class licence. Although the features of community broadcaster and narrowcasters differ (see the table on pages 4-5), an aspirant community broadcaster may fall within the character of a narrowcast service by virtue of the limited duration of its transmission, even though its programming formats may not be of "limited appeal" or appeal to special interest groups. Although putatively operating under the narrowcasting regime, the service must comply with the regulatory regime governing community broadcasters. □

Alasdair Grant

industry code and the commercial industry's Australian Music Performance Committee (AMPCOM). While the old mandatory quota probably had a positive impact when first introduced - for instance, by providing an incentive for record companies to record local acts - the same cannot be said of any of the subsequent attempts to revise or augment the quota. So although the encouragement of Australian identity, cultural diversity and innovative programming remain broadcasting policy objectives, program regulation, whether imposed or industry determined, seems unlikely to assist in achieving these ends. The answer seems to lie with structural regulation, which, in this context, means the licensing of stations programming new music for younger audiences.

HITZ was criticised for not playing the same amount of Australian music as its commercial rivals. But HITZ was dealing with a sector of the record industry in this country that was underdeveloped precisely because of the programming policies of commercial radio. HITZ gave that sector a major boost and provided considerable support to local acts through airplay, performer inter-

views, publicity for venues and independent releases.

### Popular music policy

HITZ began transmitting just as the government released its latest report on the music industry. The Music Industry Advisory Council (MIAC) had established an Export Focus Group (EFG) to examine the export potential of the local music industry. Its report identified radio as one of two major problem areas:

'The EFG considers that the majority of commercial radio stations do not back new Australian talent, with many radio stations recycling old Australian and international music in a "classic hits" format. Good airplay and record sales in Australia are a precursor for gaining domestic success, which is an integral component of achieving international success'.

If this sounds familiar it is because it echoes a string of other reports and journalistic accounts, including the Price Waterhouse economic profile of the music industry, the AUSMUSIC *Stayin' Alive* project on the live music scene, and Lesley Sly's interviews with key industry players in *The Power*

*and the Passion*.

The most simple and effective way to stimulate the musical interests of the young, expose new talent and generate export income is to license HITZ-type stations. This form of government action should not attract criticisms of subsidisation, protectionism or anachronism, since such stations would not distort the market but develop one. Rather than staging nostalgic indulgences with musical archives, these stations would be uniquely hospitable to new genres and technological modes of popular music making.

### Conclusion

AUSMUSIC argued that the Minister should either exercise his power under clause 84(1) of the Act and direct the ABA to give priority to the allocation of broadcasting services band licences to community youth/new music stations on the HITZ model, or, if reluctant to do this, advise the ABA that such an allocation would substantially further the range of government policy objectives. AUSMUSIC suggested that the government had a unique opportunity to promote broadcasting diversity, stimulate local



and export-oriented new music and realise a range of spin-off benefits for youth welfare, employment and training in one fell swoop. Here was a chance to demonstrate the new, more inclusive approach to cultural policy promised by the formation of a combined arts and communications portfolio. It would involve no further legislation, regulation or expenditure, and would be based, not on speculation or dubious extrapolation from economic models, but on one of the most successful experiments in the history of Australian broadcasting. But the 'save HITZ' furore died down and its frequency was resumed by another contender, a Christian station offering 'Melbourne's best mix of light hits'. HITZ returned to the ABA's file of aspirant community broadcasters and the planning process proceeded, interminably. The station must now wait for the finalisation of the ABA's planning process, then apply for a community radio licence when the ABA chooses to advertise. In the meantime, it conducts further test transmissions when permitted to do so.

While recognising the importance of maintaining the integrity of ABA procedures and protecting the interests of other aspirants, it is disappointing that the lessons of the HITZ summer did not really register, that sympathy could not be translated into action. It is disappointing that a regulatory regime designed to facilitate the development and availability of new services was, in this case, unable to do so. It is disappointing that the government was either unable or unwilling to support a small but vital cultural enterprise which embodied so many of the better features of *Creative Nation*. But it is heartening to know that, although the earlier window of opportunity was lost, the HITZ story continues. □

*Mick Counihan teaches Media Studies at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, and was engaged by AUSMUSIC as a policy consultant during the time the research for this article was conducted.*

# Teenagers tune in, turn on ...and drop out

The ABA has released a report which affirms the importance of radio to teenagers, while plotting a decline in their use of the medium.

*Music, new music and all that: Teenage radio in the 90s* found that the average teenager listened to nearly 13 hours of radio each week, a fall of three hours (20%) from five years ago. In contrast, adult listening declined by only 9% over the same period. The report notes the general industry view attributing the decline to the introduction of FM 'mainstream' stations and the disappearance of teen-oriented AM stations. Upon entering the market in the early 1980s, FM radio stations targeted audiences in the 18-30 year old bracket, and have largely retained these original audiences, who are now approaching, or have attained, middle age. Consequently, these stations maintain program formats that appeal to those whose musical tastes were formed during the 1960s and 1970s, and increasingly distance themselves from contemporary musical trends. Musical styles excluded from these formats for being too avant garde - styles such as dance and rap music - are increasingly regarded as mainstream by younger audiences. However, this thesis offers only, at best, a partial explanation, as the decline in teenage radio listening follows a consistent downward trend commencing in the the 1960s.

While 63% of those surveyed rated current radio services 8/10 or better, most (53%) wished for a wider choice of radio stations, 69% were not loyal to any station. The report states:

'The apparent inconsistency between the reasonably high satisfaction level expressed by teenagers about radio in general and the declining trend is not easy to reconcile. This finding may support the hypothesis discussed earlier that teenagers tend to spread their available leisure time across an increasing array of technologies. However, [it] may also suggest that lack of choice influences teenagers to increase their use of alternative music sources such as CDs or cassettes.'

The tentativeness of the report's conclusions follows necessarily from the disparate nature of its data. Much of the report uses information gathered in 1994 for the ABA's wider survey of listening habits, *Listening to the Listeners*, published last year. Information derived from other studies, together with ratings surveys and interviews with industry figures, was also used. The studies examined children of differing age brackets, with the median group (that is, information derived from *Listening to the Listeners*) being 14-19 years and an overall age range of 8-19 years. Although in some respects a 'composite' report format - which presents a pastiche of findings in order to display an overall mosaic - can be enlightening, in this case it is merely confounding. Moreover, the study repeats and, in so doing, compounds the flawed assumption contaminating each of its constituent elements: that of the homogeneity of perception, taste or outlook of those whose ages span the cusps of childhood and adulthood. None of the excerpts of individual reports appearing in the survey breaks down the responses of its subject age group into further sub-groups.

*Music, new music and all that: Teenage radio in the 90s* raises important questions; finding answers to them requires a more committed approach. □

Alasdair Grant