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Abstract

In 1993 the then Science and Technology Studies Department was given the chance to bid to provide two first year undergraduate STS subjects through Open Learning Australia. One of the subjects would be accompanied by a new radio series produced by ABC Radio National Open Learning. The Department was given a substantial grant to develop the print materials and scripts for the series.

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In 1993 the then Science and Technology Studies Department was given the chance to bid to provide two first year undergraduate STS subjects through Open Learning Australia. One of the subjects would be accompanied by a new radio series produced by ABC Radio National Open Learning. The Department was given a substantial grant to develop the print materials and scripts for the series.

In effect, the medium went with the offer, but the Department judged that a venture into radio would be a gentler introduction to distance learning media than the television series that colleagues elsewhere on campus were undertaking around that time through PAGE. The exposure that would come with being the national provider of STS through OLA was a major attraction.

The series *Introducing Science and Technology Studies* consists of thirteen fifty-minute programmes. Sharon Beder, John Schuster and the author developed the scripts and presented much of the material in the series, and Rhonda Roberts coordinated the effort. We were blessed with an excellent producer in ABC-RN's Joe Gelonesi, who displayed the utmost commitment and worked hard with us to get a good product. He was encouraging but exacting, and patient as we radio novices learned the ropes. He had not only a great feel for what would work well in audio, but a substantial understanding of STS – he was taking a Masters in the field at the time – so that we felt comfortable the ideas would not be compromised as the material was reworked.

We had a head-start in that we had a well developed subject on campus, refined over seven years in a team effort. It was pitched at people with no background in the social study of science and technology, and had a coherent organising theme against which the ideas unfolded week by week. It is challenging material as a university subject and we knew it would be so to a wider audience; its starting point is to turn on their heads people's standard assumptions about the nature of science and technology and their roles in society.

There were several devices we had developed in lectures to get across complex and often confronting ideas in an accessible and lively way – including case studies, dialogues, sketches, spoofs, and readings – which translated quite readily into radio. Nonetheless, it was a long and intense process under Joe's guidance to work our material into good radio form. As well as straight talking from us, the programmes used different voices (with some well known actors as readers), sound effects and location pieces (the 'scenery' was sometimes genuine and

sometimes superimposed in the studio!), conversations, question-and-answer sessions, street voxpops, a round table discussion, and even a staged tutorial segment to explore views on an issue.

The experience was interesting and the effort was worthwhile. The OLA study unit has run several times since its launch in 1995. While enrolments have not been as high as we had hoped, scores of students have been given a chance to add STS to their studies, and their reactions have been overwhelmingly positive. The radio series has been broadcast regularly not only during the OLA study periods, but often at other times when ABC-RN has needed to fill the normal OLA slot. Besides those taking the study unit, many Australians listen to OLA programmes for interest – even at five in the morning – and in the mid-morning hour which our series occupied for its first two broadcasts in 1995 the ABC estimates up to 30 000 people tuned in. Audio cassettes of *Introducing Science and Technology Studies* have been sold through the ABC, and the set of tapes has been one of the most popular. At one time it was reported to be outselling even religious studies and a history of popular music! Both ABC Open Learning and STS get a steady trickle of letters, phone calls and e-mail messages expressing appreciation – and occasionally engaging us on the issues. The tapes have proved valuable for the other versions of the subject: students on campus can use them as an extra resource to revisit topics in lectures or catch up on missed ones; we use extracts in lectures to provide variety; and they form part of the materials for a 'Home Study' version and for the subject as taught at the Graham Park campus at Berry. We are lucky that the material in the series will not date quickly, and we can introduce fresh examples or recent theoretical insights into the print materials. Other subjects we have contemplated offering in distance mode will almost certainly require revision after a very few years.

Two lessons from the experience are clear. Producing a high quality series is time-consuming. Even with well developed lecture material, we probably spent at least

ten hours developing ideas for each programme, drafting a script and reworking it with Joe's help. Studio recording took three or four hours per fifty minute programme – though it became faster and required fewer takes as we learned the techniques. Joe spent at minimum a further ten hours on each programme: recording readings, editing, and finding and grafting in effects, music and documentary extracts.

Consequently, a good set of programmes does not come cheap. We did not cost the exercise rigorously at the time, and were in any case prepared to invest the effort for the various benefits we could foresee. Had we fully taken our time into account, the development grant would barely have covered it. We understand the ABC likewise spent more time on the series than their OLA funding could have justified.

Clearly there are limited opportunities to offer subjects through OLA, and many subjects run without supporting radio series. Even when new series are produced, it is unlikely that the relatively generous development funding we received will be available again. However, there may be other radio opportunities – perhaps single programmes, perhaps something developed with local radio stations. Distance learning providers can also consider audio tapes as a key resource. They need to be done well, and a lot of thought put into providing an interesting format, with variety and breaks. Remember that a single voice may provide even less stimulus than the much derided 'talking head' of cheaply produced educational videos. Occam's Razor on ABC-RN manages to sustain interest with a single unadorned voice for just 13 minutes. With even shorter monologues than that you will find students' attention drifting and *you will get complaints that they had to keep rewinding.*

So radio programmes or audio tapes can be a valuable component of flexible delivery. The range of benefits from them may not be immediately apparent. Nevertheless, what will inevitably be a major investment of time and energy calls for a hard-headed examination of costs.