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Alternative Solutions: Multiculturalism and the Struggle for Hegemony in Australian Community Broadcasting¹

Introduction

'Who listens to community radio anyway?' This has undeniably been the most common response to my investigations of the history of community radio in Australia. However, for those involved in the establishment of 3ZZ Radio in Melbourne, their struggle was about more than broadcasting to their own cultural and linguistic communities. It had a greater social significance, and would change the nature of the Australian broadcasting sector. The history of 3ZZ Radio is an indicator of the social context in which it is set; that is, 1970s Australia. Its rise and plummet out of existence between 1974 and 1977 reflects both the winds of change brought about by Gough Whitlam, and the sudden roll-back of social progressivism by Malcolm Fraser. Pioneers of Non-English Speaking Background (NESB) community broadcasting in the 1970s considered its development as a great triumph against Anglo cultural dominance. However, the triumph was never complete. To this day, there remains an ongoing battle between community broadcasters and bureaucracies for funding and control.

NESB Australians, in their struggle for media in Melbourne, saw control and self-governance as important aspects in the fight against social inequalities. They recognised that media was an important means through which hegemonic conceptions of the nation are produced (Jakubowicz, "Speaking in Tongues"). Their experience also allows me, as a historian, to view the effects and limits of official multiculturalism, and how only so much difference and tolerance is acceptable into the *status quo*.

Multiculturalism, Tolerance and Hegemony

Multiculturalism

Although never the official policy of the Whitlam Government, the term and concept of 'multiculturalism' began to appear into government documents and reports in the early 1970s. Immigration Minister Al Grassby gave a speech titled *A Multi-Cultural Society for the Future* in August 1973, but the Government did not take official steps to adopt multiculturalism as its agenda, even though events were moving in that direction (Warby). The final adoption of a multicultural agenda was undertaken by the Fraser Government after 1975, followed by the establishment of government funded multicultural services (such as the Special Broadcasting Service) and the employment of personnel able to support and extend these directions (Warby).

Multiculturalism in Australia, in a broad sense, has produced limited progressive outcomes for minority groups. On one hand, Kerie Newell and Andrew Jakubowicz suggest a multicultural society is based upon mutual respect and recognition of difference, a commitment to the core values of Australian democracy and a concern for harmony (see Jakubowicz and Newell, 130-131). On the other, John Rex argues that multiculturalism is the organisation of society so that ethnic segments are

incorporated and dominated by other groups. Ethnic segments, he continues, would otherwise be separate societies not bound by the state (Rex 15).² Multicultural policies in Australia tend to incorporate different groups into the core culture rather than requiring any change of the core culture.

Seizing the opportunity that came with the government's new multicultural policies in the early 1970s was a major coalition of NESB migrant organisations. Later dubbed the 'ethnic lobby,' it pushed heavily for reform in education, language services, media services and an increase in the development of post-arrival programs for migrant groups (Lowe Davis 88). Even in this era of social-policy reform, the established broadcasters (both public and private) were reluctant to acknowledge multiculturalism. Jakubowicz argued that, during this period, the ABC,

would brook no challenge to its class and culture specific world view and the hegemony of bourgeois discourse to which it had laid claim. Commercial radio and TV welcomed the internationalism of North American bourgeois material interests...but invited no others. (106-107)

Restrictions on multilingual broadcasting also hindered the development of multicultural practices in the media. Until 1973, multilingual broadcasts were limited to 2.5% of total transmission time, with compulsory translation to English of all messages in foreign languages. In 1974, the ABC refused to program multilingual material, arguing against the great expense, time and strain it would place upon existing resources. ABC manager for Victoria, E. A. Whiteley, argued similarly in 1976 against the lack of time, and, "apart from that, subtitling in English is expensive and often far from satisfactory...I foresee little opportunity of providing [a session of news about the various European countries] on TV" (qtd. in Lowe Davis 88).

By the end of 1975, the radical changes in social policy were officially halted under the new Liberal government headed by Malcolm Fraser.³ By 1977, the promotion of multiculturalism at federal level had temporarily ceased, to be revisited at a later time. The forced closure of 3ZZ ethnic access radio in Melbourne was a part of this process.⁴

Tolerance and Minorities in Australia

Whilst multiculturalism has been at the forefront of Australian social policy since 1974, weak forms of multiculturalism and tolerance have been continually practised. Government policies on tolerance, Albert Moran argues, have been the outcome of 'weak,' as opposed to 'strong,' multiculturalism. He suggests that the former focuses upon tolerance of cultural differences of a private, affective, folkloric or social kind. Strong versions, on the other hand, regard cultures as "ways of organising social relations, determining roles, distributing power and validating knowledges" (Penman qtd. in Moran 159). Weak multiculturalism also works to discourage class unity and appease a divided social front. This also establishes a clear and distinct body of minorities *against* the mainstream.

Such practices of tolerance and weak multiculturalism limited the success of 3ZZ radio, as demonstrated by funding shortfalls and limitations to independent control.

A Brief History of Community Broadcasting and Funding

Significant federal support for NESB community broadcasting in Australia did not begin until 1973, when Al Grassby initiated a number of progressive media policies (Jakubowicz 109) that would eventually break the Anglo stranglehold on the media, particularly by the ABC. In 1974-75, these initiatives led to the establishment of 3ZZ by the ABC in Melbourne, and the government's Radio Ethnic Australia (see Moran 151).

In terms of funding, like most community stations, 3ZZ met programming budgets by raising funds through memberships, appeals, fees, donations, limited sponsorship, subsidies from academic institutions and government grants. It was not until 1979 that the Federal Government began to subsidise community radio. 3ZZ was ultimately controlled by the ABC, which also provided and paid for administration and training of staff.

The Movement for NESB Community Media

A crucial role of NESB community broadcasting has been to develop culturally inclusive communities. Jakubowicz and Newell argue that NESB community broadcasting has been a positive step away from the socially unprogressive, monocultural policies of Australia's past. They argue that, on one level, such developments are vital in fulfilling the emotional needs of migrants from non-English speaking backgrounds. On another level, ethnic broadcasting has been important in that it aims to "enrich not only those who faced virtual extermination in an Anglocentric media, but would also enrich and broaden the horizons of all Australians" (Jakubowicz and Newell 131). Moreover, NESB community broadcasters have been important as political representatives of communities, and in providing important information on government services and wider issues (see NEMBC).

Moreover, the hegemonic discourse of the mass media, Jakubowicz says, has sought to fragment, isolate and scatter non-Anglo immigrants (106).⁵ In resistance to this process, he argues, non-Anglo immigrants have settled near one another, forming communal bonds through activities such as clubs, language schools and newspapers. This also resulted in the establishment of 3ZZ radio.

The Rise and Plummet of 3ZZ

Established in 1974, 3ZZ was Australia's first ABC-owned, community-based radio station. The 3ZZ call-sign, through the film 'Z,' popularised the letter as a symbol of liberty (Dugdale 37). Until its closure in 1977, 3ZZ broadcast in twenty languages. It was a tremendous achievement for the multicultural lobby, celebrated in homes, at work, in clubs, and at the 3ZZ studios. 3EA was yet to come, and 3CR in Melbourne broadcast no ethnic programs at that time. In December 1976, an ABC survey found that, over a one-month period, out of 2988 participants, from Maltese, Italian, Yugoslav, Greek, Spanish, Turkish, Lebanese and Egyptian backgrounds, 50.1% had listened to 3ZZ (Miley). Respondents to the survey noted that, though they also

listened to 3EA, they favoured 3ZZ because of its policies on world news coverage, teaching children traditional cultures, and providing information on the rights of NESB groups to government services.

Radio 3ZZZ proclaimed in more recent times that even after other NESB community stations had emerged, it was 3ZZ which captured the pulse of ethnic communities. For the first time, it provided the opportunity for ordinary people to voice their concerns on-air, in their own language, and to have a say as to how the station was managed. 3ZZ's motto became "The station where the people make the programs" (Zangalis 27). Moreover, "It was an extension of community ethos and life" (3ZZZ Online). George Zangalis argued that "3ZZ became an every day issue and concern for the ethnic community" (3ZZZ Online).

The success of 3ZZ was immediately quashed, however, as the result of an estranged relationship formed at the outset between ABC Directors, the Fraser Government and the 3ZZ Planning Committee. The ABC was reluctant to endorse the Planning Committee's activities, especially in terms of community sovereignty over programming. On 4 October 1974, the ABC held a meeting with those interested in the as yet un-named station. The parties discussed policies that the station should maintain, and the level of independence it would obtain from the ABC. Those present at the meeting included representatives from the Migrant Workers Committee (Zangalis), Community Radio Foundation, Victorian Council of Social Services, Alternative Radio Association and La Trobe University Media Centre. The ABC directors were unprepared, and responded to the meeting with disdain. Only staff of the ABC Special Projects department remained enthusiastic about opening up ABC to the wider community (Zangalis 23). Most non-ABC parties, who attended following meetings, argued that the new station should be totally independent, adequately funded by the ABC, and managed by the community participants. The ABC was initially against such freedoms, appearing to support the view of the commercial sector that access radio had no place in Australian media.

Eventually, a management agreement was formed between the community groups and the ABC. Participating groups, elected from within their communities, were to comprise the Planning Committee to manage programming at the station. The Committee was assisted only by the ABC's full-time administration and training staff. The ABC retained ownership rights and, in actuality, could apply indirect pressures and controls. From here, community groups and ABC staff embarked on creating an access station in which rights to access, and to broadcast culturally specific issues and ideas, was recognised in the station's policy.

The relationship between the 3ZZ Planning Committee and ABC never achieved a complete sense of trust. Whilst the Planning Committee continually pushed for increased funding, freedom and resources, it rarely succeeded. In its "Report to the ABC" in June 1976, the committee demanded acknowledgement through a greater sense of permanency. This implied increased funding and the improvement of 3ZZ facilities. The committee also complained that,

[w]hile the hours of broadcasting have remained unchanged...the number of community groups, individuals and languages serviced by 3ZZ have increased

considerably...[resulting in a] reduction in the available program hours of some groups. (Elliot)

Amongst other demands were better transmission facilities, increased paid publicity and the "tolerance, understanding, sympathy and support" of ABC executives (Elliot). Zangalis was particularly concerned with the ABC staff appointed to the station, who were predominantly Anglo-Australian and monolingual. Moreover, "[t]he ABC's Anglo dominated public service staffing policies made it extremely difficult to employ 'ethnics'" (Zangalis 27).

Politics hindered the success of 3ZZ both internally and externally (Zoeller).⁶ More important were the conflicts between the 3ZZ Planning Committee and the ABC Directors. At the time, this demonstrated the ABC's reluctance to explore both community access broadcasting and ethnic-based programming. ABC commissioners had shown some support for 3ZZ, although this only surfaced when the ABC's competence was directly brought into question. For example, in May 1976, the Liberal Party migrant officer, G. Panagacos, accused the ABC of allowing radical political factions to infiltrate and determine 3ZZ management, programming and policy, rather than serve the interests of the community. Referring to a dispute between the 3ZZ Planning Committee and 3ZZ staff, Panagacos criticised the political infighting that had forced 3ZZ management to temporarily disband. The ABC's Keith Mackriell retaliated, interpreting Panagacos' comments as an attack on the ABC's abilities to function efficiently ("Report: Station 3ZZ"). The ABC resented government interference in its internal affairs. However, this may have less to do with its concern about the stability and functioning of 3ZZ, and more to do with the ABC's control in managing its internal conflicts.

In these and other battles with ABC and the government, 3ZZ brought a new challenge to the hegemonic stronghold of the commercial and government media. Simply by providing an alternative to mainstream broadcasting, the symbolic weight of 3ZZ as an anti-hegemonic force was part of the excitement felt by many of the station's participants. The belief of 3ZZ is that mainstream media are part of the hegemonic structures of society. Mainstream media assist the *status quo* in implementing its ideas through policy, and changes in policy. A Gramscian argument would be that a hegemonic class, at the forefront of a social historic bloc is able to articulate its own world-view on the basis of socio-political conditions and productive relations. This bloc lends substance and ideological coherence to its social power (see Gramsci qtd. in Rupert 30), and manages to win the active consent of those over whom it rules (28). Through mass media, hegemonic powers accomplish this process to reinforce their own social and political standing, by embedding it within the culture of the nation. The very existence of 3ZZ, as well as the stations policies, had been a symbolic act of defying this process. Moreover, mainstream productions often only reinforce hegemonic stereotypes of class, gender and race.⁷ 3ZZ actively presented an alternative to hegemonic representations, and quickly became a movement against existing racial and political dominance.

It was not unusual, then, that 3ZZ's greatest problem was the government. From the end of 1975, a lack of political and financial support for 3ZZ, and access radio in general, began to spread. The government was wary of the uncensored programming carried out by 3ZZ and the fact that the station was able to bring into public discourse

controversies which had lain hidden in the pages of the ethnic press. Whilst editors of the ethnic press could be warned if they were overly inflammatory, the government regarded radio as a far too dangerous a forum for social debate (Jakubowicz 117). The government forbade the EA stations in Melbourne and Sydney to broadcast political material for similar reasons. Eventually, long-standing antagonism from government bureaucrats, and subsequent pressures upon the ABC, forced 3ZZ's closure in June 1977.

The Closure of 3ZZ and Ethnic Access Revival

Although 3ZZ maintained a high level of listenership, the station was closed by the ABC under direct written instruction from the federal government. Executives from the ABC appeared unremorseful about 3ZZ's closure, stating, among other reasons, that 3ZZ "was opened at the request of the then government and was not a station specifically requested by the commission" (Norad). ABC executives and the government failed to recognise the depth and passion of Melbourne's NESB communities for 3ZZ (3ZZZ Online).⁸ Despite a backlash that almost erupted into physical violence at the station premises, 3ZZ remained closed. The arrangement of an alternative transmitter at 3LO did not eventuate, though, for a short while, 3ZZ utilized a mobile transmitter van.

The closure of 3ZZ was a significant achievement for the conservative Fraser government, which sought to remove apparently radical politics from within the media. In 1977, the government asserted that 3ZZ was closed merely because it was duplicating the government's ethnic service, 3EA, and that the act was not politically motivated. It should be noted that in the days surrounding the closure of 3ZZ, Commonwealth Police were utilised for reasons the ABC and government denied as political.⁹

Concetta Benn, a former ABC Commissioner (1975-78), believes that it was because of 3ZZ's role in uniting and providing resources to community groups, and because ordinary people began to believe they could produce change in society, that 3ZZ was shut down (qtd. in Dugdale viii). Not only was pressure from the government exerted for this reason, but also from industry. General Motors Holden (GMH) expressed discontent at the opportunity given by 3ZZ for Italian, Greek, Maltese and Arabic workers to be informed about their rights, and to express criticism of GMH's attitude to migrant workers. As migrant workers comprised 90% of the 3ZZ audience (Zangalis 31), GMH corresponded with both the Federal Government and the ABC as to the nature and content of such material on ABC radio. Pressures were consistently placed upon the ABC, making it clear that certain political forces were becoming more concerned with the content of community programming, particularly the ethnic component (Zangalis 31).¹⁰

Conclusions

It is clear that government and ABC policy sought to protect the public electronic forum from the 'ethnic taint.' Both official and informal resistance by the ABC in the 1970s towards programming for non-Anglo audiences indicate that the ABC, as stated

earlier, “would brook no challenge to its class and culture specific world view and the hegemony of bourgeois discourse to which it had laid claim” (Jakubowicz 107).

Government regulation and ABC policy had, at the time, ensured bourgeois control over an immensely powerful public medium for social critique.

This exemplifies the cultural defence networks established by ruling groups to maintain hegemony. Ghassan Hage’s discussion of the limits of tolerance demonstrates the ability of the mainstream to be intolerant when difference is too great. This process utilises a repressive form of tolerance, one that maintains only the guise of cultural accommodation. Hage argues that “those who were and are asked to be tolerant remain capable of being intolerant....[T]he advocacy of tolerance [thus] left people empowered to be intolerant” (9).¹¹ 3ZZ’s closure showed the extent of intolerance for other cultures, especially ones that provided political and social provocation to established power dynamics in society.

Such a situation implies support for a limited multiculturalism that encourages social diversity. Yet, Australian society has been hesitant to support processes of ethnic self-management. This approach promotes multiculturalism for the mainstream, whilst social minorities receive little actual support in cultural accommodation.

Jakubowicz also argues that early experiments in ethnic media were based upon the realisation by the Liberal government of several factors viewed as essential to the success of Australian capitalism. One of these was recognising the importance of undermining any broad working-class solidarity through appeals to other forms of allegiance which could cut across class. Fraser was also confronted with the growing ethnic diversity of the Australian population (Jakubowicz 110).¹² His approach to multiculturalism and NESB community media can be viewed as part of bourgeois moves to limit the spread and strength of certain types of cultural change.¹³

The experience of organisations such as 3ZZ demonstrates the difficulties in promoting ‘strong’ multiculturalism in Australia. These experiences also indicate a continuing struggle over meaning and content, for control of the boundaries of social discourse and for ideological hegemony (Jakubowicz 124). By appropriating the available technologies to represent ones’ self, NESB broadcasters have undermined existing hegemonic dynamics and become active historical agents.¹⁴ In capturing the importance of alternative solutions to broadcasting in Australia, Richard Harding states:

Broadcasting is democracy’s thermometer, a good indicator of the political and social health of a nation...free broadcasting [is a symbol]...of true democracy....[If] the broadcasting system cannot effectively play their part, democracy itself is at risk. (vii)

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hegemony, multiculturalism and broadcasting in Australia. Apart from 3ZZ Radio, this research also featured case studies on SBS Television and 4AAA Indigenous Radio.

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ENDNOTES:

- ¹ This paper was presented at the UQ Australian Studies conference, 'The Body Politic' in Brisbane, 24-26 November 2004. It has been peer-reviewed and appears on the Conference Proceedings website by permission of the author(s) who retain(s) copyright. The paper may be downloaded for fair use under the Copyright Act (1954), its later amendments and other relevant legislation.
- ² Also, see J. Horton.
- ³ Whitlam's policies attempted to alter a nation that had spent seventy-five years under the 'White Australia policy.' Michael Clyne argues that government policy had formerly been implemented to the effect that any ideas not conforming to Anglo-European interpretations of settlement or identity were un-Australian ("Language Policy in Australia"). Moreover, foreign languages and cultures were something to be fought against, particularly in the media. In this sense, Whitlam's policies towards ethnic community media could be viewed as radical.
- ⁴ A number of positive contributions were made in favour of multiculturalism and multilingualism under Fraser. Donald Horne described the development of language policy in Australia as a "blueprint for change...stamped by the voice of ordinary citizens" (qtd. in Clyne). In 1982, the government commissioned a Senate inquiry into language and services for NESB communities.

Clyne points out that this inquiry led to an increased enthusiasm for language issues, and greater acknowledgment of diverse languages and cultures within Australia's national language policy ("Language Policy in Australia"). A positive aspect for the media was the recommendation for increased broadcasting in languages other than English. Later, this inquiry would also form the basis of contemporary language policy.

- ⁵ Jakubowicz also says, "Then they would be alone, these foreigners, without ties or aid outside the family, to be reconstituted without choice as 'Australian.' This strategy of isolation was fundamental to the processing of new settlers - the shock of the new, from which there could be no escape, only adaptation" (106).
- ⁶ Richard Zoeller, Supervisor of the ABC Special Projects Department and 3ZZ Station Coordinator, demonstrates his frustrations in a letter on behalf of all 3ZZ Staff to the Planning Committee. See also Zangalis 27-28.
- ⁷ Woolacott, qtd. in Harris, argues: 'these stereotypes are not the product of "bias"...but of the formal organisation of the look, and the way narratives work to produce identification' (132). See also Harris p.137, and Jean Baudrillard's 'The Ecstasy of Communication.' Baudrillard also discusses the political processes engaged in communication media.
- ⁸ Support for the service was illustrated by the thousands who joined up as members, the hundreds who served as broadcasters and committee members, and the hundreds of thousands of dollars contributed to Radiothons and campaigns to protect and develop ethnic broadcasting. Almost 2000 people gathered in protest at the Fitzroy Town Hall during an earlier proposal to close the station in 1975.
- ⁹ See T. Duckmanton, who states, 'Some weekend press, radio and television reports have claimed that Commonwealth police were brought on the ABC premises to close...3ZZ. This is untrue, and we have officially denied reports... Commonwealth Police in plain clothes were on hand at 3ZZ...on Saturday morning to protect commonwealth property if required....There was no need for police to intervene and they therefore did not'.
- ¹⁰ Also, see reference to GMH in J. Dugdale, p.62.
- ¹¹ See also Hage 78-79.
- ¹² Jakubowicz argues that Fraser realised, in a wider sense, that the bourgeoisie may be dragged through the international haut bourgeois culture of state broadcasting.
- ¹³ While maintaining multiculturalism as a necessary course for social cohesion, Fraser had been extremely selective in his recognition of the plurality of cultural interests in Australia. By recruiting conservative "players" within ethnic constituencies from the predominantly the NESB middle-class, for example, Fraser planned to enlarge the "naturally conservative" social bloc, which was essential for prolonged success of the conservative parties. The establishment of SBS, as argued by Jakubowicz, is an example of this, and is more so a token symbol of cultural and public recognition for the ethnic middle-class. The announcement of SBS services in 1978 also provided a means of legitimating, for the government, the closure of 3ZZ in the previous year. This is also an example of the increased control sought by the ruling elite over information exchange and organisation, and the limiting of ethnic advocacy to groups of particular political inclinations.
- ¹⁴ See M. Meadows, *Voices in the Wilderness*, for views on the indigenous broadcasting movement.