

## **Creating Virtual Talk-Back for Community Radio – Engaging the Listener & Community.**

*by Addam Stobbs*

Since the late 1970's Radio (both public and commercial) started to change in content as a consequence of two main factors. Television really took off with the inception of new programming and formats, and media areas that had been traditionally radio based, variety talk shows, information, current affairs, etc., were migrating to television. Also from 1975 FM transmission changed the audio quality of radio significantly allowing close to high fidelity broadcasting that gave radio broadcasts greater clarity and presence.

These two events changed the nature of radio programming significantly. We saw the rise of high 'quality' music based programme formats (quality is very subjective), and the more interesting concept of engaging the listener as part of the broadcast – talk-back.

Commercial and public broadcasters quickly took up the new programming. Community radio did not exist as a sector in those days.

Looking at the recent ratings in metropolitan centres across Australia there are two types of radio programming that stand out - AM based talk-back (some of the highest rating stations are commercial and public talk-back). High concept commercial music stations are also highly rated.

Looking at these trends and superimposing them onto community broadcasting, we can see that our community sector is doing well on the music front. The diversity of music available in Australia from the community sector is staggering. The sheer quantity and quality is immense and covers every genre and niche.

Information based radio (spoken word or talk radio without talk-back) exists in public and commercial radio. Public radio has a significant amount of spoken word content – e.g. Radio National and ABC News Radio. On commercial radio it's a lot less obvious and is more or less related to sports and racing networks.

In community radio we have a number of stations whose licenses are primarily to provide spoken word content to their communities of interest, e.g. the RPH stations. Generally this is where community radio excels, the community narrative is articulated most effectively on community radio.

The question I would like to address is why do we not have talk-back on community radio? Does any exist? If so, is it good? Is it potentially legally dangerous (defamation, etc.)? Are there alternatives? I set out a while ago to find out.

There is some talk-back on community radio. The quality and quantity is nothing like the engaging and frenetic stuff on the AM stations. The community radio presenters are mainly volunteers; talk-back takes a significant team of people. Many stations do not have delay. In any case delay offers little protection; it's a false security blanket. Most serious broadcasting issues are not going to be stopped by a 7 second delay.

Here are a few observations about talk-back I've heard on community radio:

- Usually the topics are fairly 'light' – but relevant to local communities
- Same callers (consistently)
- Frequently no callers
- Goes very slowly and lacks impact
- Often it actually excludes the other listener as the dynamic between host and caller does not connect with the audience.
- Presenters are understandably not confident with going into contentious issues, and lack of suitable preparation.

Possibly the biggest fear for the presenter and the station would be the possibility that a caller could defame someone or that the presenter and the caller could get into dangerous defamatory conversations without being aware of it. Commercial and public broadcasters can usually settle out of court if they have to, as they have the financial resources. Most of us with community licenses do not have these resources. Defamation insurance is available, but the more talk you have the more your premium costs. At 3JOY we've tried a few incarnations of talk-back but none of them have worked successfully. There is a significant amount of panel and telephone technology required to have active and interesting talk back using more than one to-air line.

Using email as a form of talk-back for local content is good although it can be slow and, at times, long winded. If you are discussing topics and want feedback this is a reasonable path, but it's not brilliant. Often the listeners' response has to be précised as it ends up as a long philosophical rant. Instant messaging services and web based chat clients are available. The ones I have seen have been ok, but I have seen some rather nasty stuff come in and presenters read it verbatim.

The best option I think is SMS feedback through an SMS service provider. The way it works is that the listener sends an SMS to the number given to your station by the provider. It is sent to the station/studio computer as an email. It's quick, it's cheap, it has 160 character limit, and it also contains the sender's number.

Privacy legislation prevents the disclosure on air of personal telephone numbers, but this very fact discourages abuse.

A basic SMS service costs \$65 per year. The listeners pay the standard 25c fee, and there is no financial gain for the station. A higher SMS fee can be

established but I wouldn't recommend it. Making community radio accessible is what we are about. Using SMS as a 'virtual talk-back' system is good, but there are a few things to be aware of:

- There can be a significant time-lag when it takes time for listeners to respond – around 10-20 minutes.
- If the listener has a lot to say they send multiple messages
- Don't use the amount of feedback as a gauge or 'rating' indication as to how good your show is or how well it's being received.
- Don't rely on it as your programme format
- Don't get sucked into SMS bun fights
- Watch out for screen refreshes – use a good email programme
- Use a big font
- ***Don't send ANY replies via an SMS*** back to the listener
- Try to negotiate an easy to use SMS number with the service provider - at 3JOY we use 0427 JOY 949 (Joy is the station, 949 is the frequency)
- Don't ask for the listener to SMS in to win a prize
- SMS polls are really good
- Select a feedback topic or question that can be answered in 160 characters.
- Don't try to conduct an SMS session on your own phone in the studio, it's fraught with danger.

Using these technologies is an effective way to engage the listener and to encourage the community to become a part of your station.

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3JOY – [allegro.org.au](http://allegro.org.au) & [joy.org.au](http://joy.org.au)