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RADIO PROGRAMMING FOR YOUNG ADULTS: THREE NEW ZEALAND CASE STUDIES

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Abstract

The central question posed by this thesis is how radio stations, and more specifically programme directors, attract and construct an audience of listeners aged between 18 and 25 years old. The thesis examines the political and social factors influencing broadcasters targeting young adults both in this country and internationally. It then analyses the broadcasts and programming strategies of three New Zealand radio stations – a student, an iwi and a commercial station.

Broadcasting is examined on three levels: firstly the political and historical context of radio broadcasting is outlined including issues such as media ownership, government regulation and the structure of media institutions; secondly the daily operating practices of broadcasters are assessed, along with how programming choices are made in light of externally imposed constraints such as the desire to make a profit; and finally textual analysis is used to examine the material that is produced for broadcast.

Programme directors are defined here as key gatekeepers because they determine the way a radio station sounds within the parameters of a particular format. Williams (1990) correctly maintains that broadcasting forms a continuous flow, but for ease of academic discussion each of these radio stations is analysed in terms of its music programming, advertising and promotion, news and information and DJ chat. Analysis of the verbal aspects of the broadcast draw on Goffman (1981), Brand and Scannell (1991) and Montgomery (1986). Music programming is discussed with reference to Rothenbuhler (1985) and unstructured interviews conducted by the researcher with the programme directors at each of the three stations.

The New Zealand case studies exemplify international trends evident in radio stations which target 18 to 25 year olds. The programme directors in question presume this age group listens to the radio in the evenings, prefers music to talk and current affairs, likes newly released material rather than older songs and is likely to purchase leisure and entertainment products. The case studies provide a contemporary snap shot of how programme directors construct and perceive a specific radio audience. The thesis concludes that programmers targeting young adults use music to define the station's sound, construct an audience and sell advertising.

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Introduction: Radio, Demographics and the Young Adult Listener

Radio stations seek to fulfil a number of goals, which may include entertaining, informing or educating listeners or maximising their audience share. But stations must also operate within constraints such as making a profit, adhering to a particular format or programming within government dictated regulations. Within the parameters set by these goals and constraints there is still the potential for individuals to choose exactly what material to broadcast and generally this is the role of the programme director. Most New Zealand radio stations employ a programme director who can be defined as a key gatekeeper since it is his or her job to select and reject music for broadcast, employ DJs, determine the length of news bulletins, the amount (and sometimes type) of advertising broadcast and influence the station's generic image and the way it is promoted.

Radio stations operate on three levels. At a political level the government of the day will dictate broadcasting regulations which may affect issues of ownership and the overall purpose of a station (two contrasting purposes, for example, might be to make a profit or to inform and/or entertain the widest range of listeners possible); the station's owners are likely to dictate its format and desired target audience, while it is the task of individual staff to implement, on a day-to-day basis, the goals and regulations imposed by both government and station management. A radio broadcast represents an interaction between the political, social and historical context within which the radio station operates, its owners and those who work there. Radio broadcasts cannot be considered in isolation from the social and political forces which shape them.

Radio is no longer a primary mass medium, rather it has become something to listen to while doing other things. Contemporary broadcasters and media analysts acknowledge radio is only one in a range of media and perceive radio audiences as fragmented on the basis of factors such as their age, gender or ethnicity. In New Zealand, the British broadcasting ethos of playing a range of music, entertainment and news to ensure there is something for everyone has given way to the more American approach of specific radio stations with a particular sound catering to niche audiences. Contemporary radio programmers must have some idea of who is listening to their station and individual listeners are placed in larger audience

groupings primarily on the basis of their age. To a certain extent broadcasters continue to view those within a given age bracket as an homogeneous mass, who take part in similar leisure activities, buy similar products and like listening to similar music. For example, listeners aged under 25 years old are assumed to have an interest in newly released music, to spend much of their discretionary income on leisure products and entertainment and to view news and information as an interruption to the broadcast's primary musical text. Of course broadcasters do acknowledge other factors such as the gender or ethnicity of their audience, but age represents a useful way of grouping individual listeners into a coherent mass whose particular needs, wants and desires can then be sold to advertisers.

The central question posed by this thesis is how radio programmers perceive listeners aged between 18 and 25 years old and what type of broadcasting they think will attract listeners in this age group. Following a general description of the structural factors influencing broadcasters targeting young adults, both in this country and internationally, the broadcasts and programming trends of three New Zealand radio stations are examined. All three programme directors perceive music as the central broadcast element to attract young adult listeners. This thesis examines how radio formats targeting young adults differ from other radio programming in terms of music, news and information, advertising and promotion and DJ chat. Factors which impact upon this central thesis include the decision making process surrounding music selection, how particular funding strategies affect what a radio station broadcasts, the extent to which New Zealand broadcasters (particularly those targeting young adults) are influenced by international trends and the way political regulation has impacted upon New Zealand broadcasters.

The young adult radio listener

Currently young adults are an audience neglected by radio broadcasters, but during the 1950s teenagers were a primary target audience with most American music oriented stations adopting a Top 40 format based on the singles sales charts and juke box plays. Nearly fifty years later this same group is still being courted by radio broadcasters, only now it is with formats such as classic hits and newstalk. This thesis deals with how those who are aged between 18 and 25 are perceived by radio broadcasters. Terms such as "youth" and "young adult" are imprecise, however generally this thesis will adopt these terms to describe those aged in their late teens to mid-twenties.

Age can be a biological, social or economic construct. Gaines (1994: 47), for example, defines youth in biological terms as anyone aged between fourteen and twenty-four. Abrams (1959), by contrast, defines teenagers in terms of their economic power and argues that teenage is “a collective word describing young people from the time they leave school till they either marry or reach twenty-five”. Alternatively, Weinstein stresses the importance of youth as a cultural construct. She claims “the cultural formation of ‘youth’ [has] floated free from the social group of young people. No longer restricted to adolescents, ‘youth’ became firmly available to all” (Weinstein 1994: 72).

“Youth” is now defined as an image which can sell products and advertisers have increased the category’s applicability so that instead of just targeting potential audience members on the basis of their biological age, radio programmers and advertisers now aim at anyone who remembers being young and aspires to youthful ideals. Youth has become synonymous with physical fitness, health, fashion and popular culture. There is an element of nostalgia and an appeal to “youth lost” evident in many current radio programming formats. The increase in the number of stations adopting “classic hits” formats to target “the youth of yesterday” who are “today’s adults”, reinforces the concept that popular music is now a cultural product which is available to everyone, not just the young. Music radio stations now have more than fifty years of popular music to draw upon for their programming requirements and as Turner contends:

FM’s audience listened to the Eagles in the 1970s on its record players, it tuned into FM in the 1980s so it could listen to the Eagles on its car radios, and now it is the 1990s it *still* wants to listen to the Eagles – perhaps so it can remember the 1970s.

(Turner 1993: 145)

Many western countries show a trend towards an aging population.¹ This is one reason why an increasing number of radio broadcasters reject listeners who are teenagers or young adults and devise formats to suit the more

¹ This process is known as “demographic transition” where mortality and fertility rates decline and populations tend “to stabilise at a much larger size with ... an older age structure. This process is common to most industrialised nations” (Statistics New Zealand 1995c: 13).

financially established, numerically greater number of people who are aged over 40 years old.

Age is only one indicator of a person's entertainment preferences and other factors include class, gender, ethnicity and taste cultures. "The blanket term 'youth' conceals more than simple age divisions, as a social category it embraces a wide variety of taste groups, subcultures, and fandom²; all audience segments themselves differentiated by class, ethnicity, and gender" (Shuker 1994: 227). Radio stations continue to use age as a primary indicator of a person's entertainment preferences, however they may also consider young adult radio listeners on the basis of their ethnicity (as recognised by iwi stations), musical preferences (as acknowledged by student radio stations) or gender (for example female listeners are often catered for by commercial stations).

People of the same age may have totally different outlooks, abilities and tastes, however there are certain experiences which are shared on the basis of a person's biological age. O'Donnell (1985: 27) maintains "two elements in modern society affect nearly all young people in one way or another. These are (1) compulsory education, and (2) the relative affluence of modern youth in relation to the consumer goods industry". Since the 1970s a number of other trends have effected 18 to 25 year old New Zealanders, including high youth unemployment; an increase in the number of young adults undertaking some form of tertiary training; an increase in the number of couples living in de facto relationships; and the fact that, on average, women are giving birth to their first child later, having fewer children and not marrying until they are in their late twenties, if at all.³

² "'Fans' ... collect the records put out by their favoured 'star' performers, but [this is] only one aspect of an interest which focuses rather on the image and persona of the star" (Shuker 1994: 244-245). For a more in depth discussion of 'fandom' see Shuker (1994) pp. 242-246.

³ In the year ended March 1994 the unemployment rate for 15-to-19 year olds was 21.5 percent, more than twice the national average rate of 9.4 percent, while the unemployment rate for 20-24 year olds was also higher than the national average at 14 percent (Statistics New Zealand 1995: 24). The number of equivalent full time students enrolled in New Zealand tertiary institutions has more than doubled in the last ten years from 69,092 in 1984 to 152,319 in 1994 (Ministry of Education 1996). The average age for both sexes marrying (27 years old) is (Footnote continues on the next page.)

Between the ages of 15 and 24 “most young people are expected to establish a sense of personal identity and become progressively independent from their parents” (Statistics New Zealand 1994: 59). Unemployment or tertiary education however may serve to delay the process of entering into adulthood and financial self sufficiency and to prolong the youth period. Santrock (1996: 26) defines youth as “the transitional period between adolescence and adulthood that is a time of economic and personal temporariness”. He claims this period is often characterised by frequent changes of residence, low sporadic earning levels and that marriage and family may be shunned. It is also evident that this age group has little career stability at this stage of their lives and the UK General Household Survey (1987) states “40 percent of 16-24-year-olds leave their jobs every year” (cited in Willis 1990: 14). Willis (1990: 14) contends that this is owing to low levels of job satisfaction.

The period of youth which exists between childhood and adulthood now includes many who are aged in their mid-twenties as people delay full time employment either to undertake tertiary study or because the jobs are not available. Those New Zealanders who are employed between the ages of 18 and 25 are less likely to have the financial responsibilities of children and mortgage than their adult counterparts. Many “kiwis” choose to do their OE (overseas experience) during their early to mid twenties owing to an agreement between New Zealand and Britain that New Zealanders aged under 27 may undertake working holidays in what was formerly “the mother country”. For the purposes of this thesis those aged between 18 and 25 will generally be labelled “youth” or “young adults”, however it is acknowledged that “youth” may describe someone as young as thirteen, while the term “young adult” may be extended to include all those aged under thirty five years old.

Government policy can directly affect the financial status of young adults, which may dictate an individual’s living arrangements (ie whether a person continues to live with his or her family, lives in a flat, is married or living in a de facto relationship) and entertainment choices. Finances, accessibility and available free time are three factors likely to affect a person’s media

rising and New Zealand women marry, on average, four years later than they did in the 1970s (Statistics New Zealand 1994: 86).

and/or entertainment preferences. Radio, as a cheap and personal media, may be more accessible than television, which is usually situated in a family space. Young people tend to participate in a high level of what Stewart (1992: 216) calls "away-from-home activities", even if "away-from-home" only means listening to a radio in the bedroom, rather than watching television with the rest of the family in the lounge.

Terms are coined for each generation and the "teenagers" of the 1950s became the "baby boomers" of the 1970s. Today 18 to 25 year olds are often known as Generation X, a group of media savvy, somewhat cynical twenty-somethings who cannot remember a time when popular music was not widely disseminated, who have grown up in a culture of high divorce and crime rates and huge advertising pressures. All these images grossly over-generalise characteristics held by many differing individuals on the basis of their age, however they are useful in determining, to some extent, how the media perceives and creates material for particular audiences. This thesis examines how radio broadcasters go about catering for an enigmatic group of listeners who are no longer children and are generally free from overt parental control but who do not yet have the financial stability, responsibilities nor career prospects associated with adulthood.

An overview

This thesis is split into three sections: Part I discusses theoretical and methodological considerations, Part II provides the social, historical and political context of broadcasting for young adults, and Part III uses three case studies to apply and exemplify some of the theories and concepts discussed in Parts I and II.

Chapter 1 locates the thesis firmly within the realm of media production, using critical political economy theory to stress the importance of issues such as media ownership, the boundaries within which media workers are required to produce material and how the actions of individuals are influenced by the broader political and economic environment within which they work. Critical political economy illustrates the political and organisational constraints affecting radio stations, whereas the concept of "gatekeeping", also introduced in the first chapter, highlights the day-to-day work practices of programme directors who must operate within these constraints to select and reject material for broadcast.

Chapters 3 and 4 examine the historical development of radio broadcasting which focuses primarily on young adults. Chapter 3 discusses how Britain, the United States and Australia have three differing approaches to broadcasting for young adults; while Chapter 4 investigates the New Zealand situation, to show that pre-1980s broadcasting in this country had a history of government regulation, state ownership and political interference. New Zealand's broadcasting system was deregulated in 1989 and the sale of radio broadcasting frequencies has forced contemporary commercial radio stations to operate in a saturated, intensely competitive market environment. The government did however reserve some frequencies in order to fulfil cultural and social objectives and iwi and student radio are two types of stations to have benefited from this state intervention.

Part III of the thesis represents three case studies and Chapters 5-7 on 2XS, Radio Massey and Mai FM rely on information gathered using unstructured interviews with programme directors and a textual analysis of nine hours of radio broadcasting across the three stations. Earlier in the thesis, Chapter 2 examines why these three stations were chosen as case studies, and how the specific broadcast segments were selected, along with ethical issues such as the need to identify the station's programme directors. Chapters 5-7 show how all three stations stress the importance of music programming, rely on advertising to either make a profit or cover at least part of their operational costs and cater to younger listeners. However, 2XS, Mai FM and Radio Massey have adopted differing formats, operate under a variety of government regulations and broadcast to distinct groups of listeners, who although they may be the same age, have other defining characteristics.

A range of theories and methodologies are drawn together and discussed in Chapters 1, 3 and 4. These chapters present and critique literature relating to various aspects of youth broadcasting, however this thesis does not isolate one chapter as a literature review. The first chapter examines theorists who have addressed critical political economy and gatekeeping, whilst Chapters 3 and 4 cite literature relating to topics such as popular music, radio programming and differing types of radio structures.

Primarily, this thesis deals with the production context of three New Zealand radio stations which perceive their audience as containing a sizeable number of listeners aged between 18 and 25 years old. Radio audiences are dealt with in a secondary fashion: finding out what listeners think about the radio broadcasts they hear is rejected in favour of establishing what radio broadcasters **think** their listeners want to hear. Thus, the stress is on the programme directors' perception of their audience, rather than the audience itself. The methodological approach is therefore, to use textual analysis to examine what comes out of the radio speaker and to gauge why the programme director has chosen to play that particular music or to appoint a DJ who sounds a certain way. It is conceded that a programme director only has limited choice and is under considerable pressure to adhere to a format, charter or workplace structure imposed by the station's owners or management. It is to these issues that we now turn.