



13 October 2006

Speech notes

## Association of Community Access Broadcasters

### Introduction

It is a pleasure to have the opportunity to speak again at this occasion. There has been some water under the bridge since last year's conference, with some key advances in terms of policy direction for community and regional broadcasting. I will touch on these shortly.

### Place of Access Radio

Firstly though, a few points about Access Radio and its important place as a public service provider in the wider context.

As you know, since the freemarket policies of the 90s, this government has focused hard on building up the public service broadcasting infrastructure embodied by national institutions such as TVNZ, Radio New Zealand, NZ On Air and Maori Television.

This has provided a solid public broadcasting core at the heart of our mixture of public, commercial and community broadcasting. It has ensured that New Zealanders can have access to services that create a shared space where we tune in to engaging, enriching and informative broadcasting experiences that cater to all our diverse needs.

At the same time, government is aware of the important complement to these national services that is provided by regional and community broadcasters, and the tailored services and unique local colour they offer into the mix.

We recognise the marvellous job Access Radio does of delivering on "section 36c" and other community programming beyond what can be achieved by mainstream media. Access Radio has a unique place in empowering people and communities to take the initiative and drive their own forum of expression.

Providing a voice for anyone with something to say, Access Radio truly reflects the diversity of our communities. I think John Bullock (Station Manager of Fresh FM) couldn't have put it better when he commented on Mediawatch recently that Access Radio is a "celebration of life". [*Mediawatch, Sunday 10 September*]

No other broadcasters have such an unrestricted capacity to ensure that different viewpoints are given expression. The beauty of Access Radio is that it lacks the usual restraints of programming imperatives: commercial viability, central editorial

control, the need to be consistent with a particular style, or even the need always to provide a balanced argument.

It truly embodies the notion of “free speech”.

This is, of course, one of the fundamental conditions of a true democracy. In the words of founding Access Radio co-ordinator Cindy Beavis, back in 1983 when Wellington’s experimental 2YB Access Radio was celebrating its second successful year: “It is an exercise in democracy....If you do believe that access to information is power, then the key to the bank vault is access to the media.” [*from an interview with the New Zealand Women’s Weekly*]

And the feedback Access stations and programme makers receive from their communities shows how greatly New Zealanders value this opportunity.

### **The Regional and Community Broadcasting Policy Framework**

Access Radio exists amid a variety of other local and regional services. Government has been giving considerable thought to what kind of a policy environment will ensure that regional broadcasters, in all their diversity, are best placed to continue their valuable services in the years ahead.

As you know, this was reflected in government’s Broadcasting Programme of Action for 2004 – 2009. A Programme agreed to in December 2004 to ensure a coordinated broadcasting policy for the remainder of this decade.

One of the six priorities established by the Programme of Action was the enhancement of regional and community broadcasting through a mixture of policy, spectrum allocation and funding measures covering a range of commercial and non-commercial broadcasting.

The Programme of Action also proposes the development of a more broadly and soundly based policy framework for regional and community broadcasting.

Work has been undertaken on this over the past year and I was very pleased to launch the completed Regional and Community Broadcasting Policy Framework on Tuesday last week. [*Note: launch date to be confirmed*]

The Framework makes more explicit the key roles of regional and community broadcasting, and contains a number of goals and objectives to ensure these broadcasters can reach their full potential to meet the needs of local and minority audiences. It seeks a good range of local services and a focus on innovation and originality.

As you will have seen, the Framework is not a specified list of actions but a high-level guide that will be used to give direction to operational policy, including licensing criteria for when these agreements come up for renewal. It will be valuable too as a reference for NZ On Air in determining future policies and criteria for funding allocation to regional and community services.

The Framework will play a significant role in helping foster an environment that works for regional and community broadcasters; future-proofing their services in a time of rapid change driven by new technologies.

You will have noted that the Framework does not specify additional funding for regional services. I am very aware that funding is always an issue, and this is why our Broadcasting Programme of Action included the undertaking to boost financial support for regional and community broadcasters over and above the assistance provided through free licences.

Government delivered on this in last year's Budget with the first-ever government funding for regional television programming and an additional \$220,000 (GST exclusive) per annum for community radio. This lifted NZ On Air funding for Access radio to over \$2 million (GST exclusive) in the current financial year. *[New funding for regional television consists of \$890,000 million (GST exclusive) per annum for four years]*

Through this funding, it was acknowledged that there is a place for central government in topping up regional initiatives, easing the pressure of tight budgets and providing that bit extra to work with. The main responsibility for regional services, however, remains within the communities they serve.

In terms of Access Radio, as a people's station, community buy-in is in every sense what makes Access Radio go.

As you are aware, the development of the Framework included a consultation process. Submissions were received from a range of groups with an interest in community broadcasting including the Association of Community Access Broadcasters.

You will have noted that a number of the comments made are not reflected in the Framework. This is not to say that they have been discarded or put in the too-hard basket. Indeed, a number of useful and valid points were made, and will be considered. However, this will take place at the next level of decision-making. This is because many of the submissions dealt with operational matters and a level of detail one step down from the high-level policy setting we were seeking to achieve with the Framework.

There will be ample opportunity to provide input into the process for considering these issues. Officials will be undertaking a major consultation later this year and you will have your say as to what operational policy will be required to give best effect to the broad policy direction signalled by the Framework.

### **Possibilities of digital technology**

These days, any broadcasting policy development takes place in the context of the changes and transformations expected to be achieved by digital technology.

About 80 percent of New Zealanders are connected to the Internet – one of the highest penetration rates for internet use in the world.

As a nation traditionally keen to embrace innovation, we have recognised that information and communications technology is now what makes the world go round. It is the technology of connection, knowledge and growth and has the potential to enhance many aspects of our lives.

Or to help us reach our full potential, as that mother in England experienced recently when her three-year-old bought her a car over the internet. (Fortunately the dealer didn't hold her to it.)

This is why government has developed our Digital Strategy – to ensure that New Zealand will be a world leader in using information technology to realise its economic, social, environmental and cultural goals. It is about building our knowledge society, staying on a par internationally and creating the best opportunities for New Zealanders.

Through the Digital Strategy, government has introduced its “Community Partnership Fund” which supports communities in working together to better utilise new technologies.

It is with a \$73,000 grant from this fund that Access 783 AM, Fresh FM and Community Radio Hamilton, with the help of CityLink, have developed their “Access Internet Radio – On Air” initiative to create a package of internet broadcasting services for community radio.

It is exciting to see Access Radio beginning to reach out and embrace the potential of digital technology. Potentially this could lead to a whole range of new and cost-effective ways of delivering services, reaching specialised audiences, and empowering listeners to make fuller and more personalised use of Access services. I will be watching with great interest this pioneering project.

## **Spectrum**

I would like to take the opportunity to comment briefly now on the announcements made last week by my colleague the Minister of Communications, about the results of our review of FM frequency allocation opportunities.

You will have heard the essentials: that there will be a mix of commercial and non-commercial licences. And that these will be spread among providers of local non-commercial broadcasting and future public broadcasting, as well as the “middle tier” local commercial broadcasters. This latter is in recognition of the role played by commercial outfits outside of the networked commercial radio duopoly, in providing variety and local flavour.

Any licences left over will be available to unrestricted commercial broadcasting on an auction basis.

These decisions increase the regional focus of FM spectrum allocation and seek to balance social, economic and cultural objectives, achieving a rich and diverse mix of broadcasting services for the regions.

Of concern to you, of course, is whether any of the spectrum will go to Access Radio. You are aware that there is limited FM spectrum available and many claims on it.

The Ministry for Culture and Heritage and the Ministry for Economic Development will be working together during the rest of this year on developing the policies and criteria for the allocation of available frequencies. They will do so in consultation with non-commercial providers and other interested parties, which gives the opportunity for you to stay in the loop.

Final decisions will be taken by Ministers, and it is hoped that expressions of interest will be called for early next year.

### **Concluding comments**

If there is one thing I have wanted to convey to you today it is government's commitment to helping develop a strong regional broadcasting environment that reflects and supports our diversity as New Zealanders.

Access Radio is a vital part of this and I encourage you to continue to contribute your views and perspectives during the next stage of decision-making on the Regional Policy Framework.

Now is a good opportunity – I have some time up my sleeve and am very happy to turn the floor over to you and listen to your issues.