

Pauling, 2014

Story: Radio

Page 1. The early years, 1921 to 1932

New Zealand was an early adopter of radio and a late adopter of television. Until the 1960s radio was the main non-print medium. Radio broadcasting began as a private activity. From the 1930s it came increasingly under state control. Reforms in the 1980s led to an industry that by 2010 was once again overwhelmingly private.

Origins of radio in New Zealand

New Zealand's first identified broadcast of a radio programme was on 17 November 1921. It was made from the University of Otago by physics professor Robert Jack. The broadcast included music, such as the popular song 'Hello my dearie.' Radio Dunedin (4XD) began transmitting in 1922 and is the longest continuously broadcasting station in the Commonwealth. By the end of 1923 stations were broadcasting from Dunedin, Christchurch, Wellington, Auckland, Nelson, Whanganui and Gisborne.

Voices on the waves

Clive Drummond recalls his excitement at hearing one of Robert Jack's pioneering radio broadcasts in 1921: 'So one night I ... heard [the song] *Come into the garden Maud*. I can't tell you what I said, but I nearly went through the roof as you can imagine. All the sound you ever heard was morse and static, but to hear a voice – well!'¹

Some early broadcasters, such as Jack in Otago and Clive Drummond in Wellington, were radio enthusiasts. Others, such as Wellington's Charles Forrest and Douglas Shipherd, and Robert Burrell of Auckland, were businesspeople who saw the commercial potential of radio. Regular playing of records, coupled with occasional instrumental live performances, subtly promoted sales of records, musical instruments and radio receivers.

Initially, radio broadcasts were seen by most people as only of interest to a small number of enthusiasts and commercial operators. Radio broadcasts first gained the attention of politicians not because of their content but because they wanted access to the radio-frequency spectrum, originally used for state-controlled communications and national security. As early as 1903

Parliament passed a law requiring the licensing of all stations sending or receiving 'wireless telegraphy'. Radio broadcasts in the early 1920s raised fears that uncontrolled use of the spectrum would interfere with government activities. In 1923 the state established an annual fee: five shillings for radio receivers (increased to £1.10s in 1925) and £2 for transmitters. Controls on broadcast content were also introduced. All content had to follow a strict moral code, advertising was banned and Sundays had to have substantial religious programming. These rules were closely monitored by the New Zealand Post Office.

The Radio Broadcasting Company

Racy radio

In 1928 the Racing Conference banned radio race commentaries fearing they discouraged people from going to the races and encouraged illegal gambling. Race commentators began reporting perched on step-ladders, trucks, delivery vans and vegetable carts outside the race courses. They also sent 'spies' into the race courses to bring out the results for each race. The problem was solved in 1932 when the New Zealand Broadcasting Board agreed to pay for broadcasting rights.

In 1926 the Radio Broadcasting Company (RBC) was established to provide a national broadcasting service. It was set up by electrical engineer Ambrose Harris and dairy farmer William Goodfellow, who saw the benefit of radio for rural people.

While nominally a private company it was heavily state-influenced. The RBC's main revenue came from a compulsory annual radio licence fee. The state licensed the right to receive transmissions and controlled the allocation of transmission frequencies. The company board was stacked with government officials and representatives.

Existing independent stations became known as 'B' stations, in contrast to the RBC's 'A' stations. To avoid interfering with newspaper advertising revenue, advertising was prohibited on radio. Many of the B

stations only stayed on air because they were sustained by voluntary support or were subsidiary activities of radio and record retailers.

The 1920s saw the development of many standard radio features, including children's programmes, broadcasts to schools and religious broadcasts. New Zealand's first live sports broadcast covered the Australasian sculling championship in Nelson on 28 April 1923. Alan Allardyce gave the first live rugby commentary from a game in Christchurch in May 1926.

Footnotes:

Peter Downes and Peter Harcourt, *Voices in the air: radio broadcasting in New Zealand, a documentary*. Wellington: Methuen in association with Radio New Zealand, 1976, p. 10.

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