

State Ethnic Broadcasting Advisory Committee

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REORGANISATION OF THE STRUCTURE OF BROADCASTING GROUPS, 2EA AND 3EA

Analysis of the discussion paper of the Special Broadcasting Service by the N.S.W. State Ethnic Broadcasting Advisory Committee.

GENERAL IMPRESSIONS

In analysing the discussion paper prepared by the Special Broadcasting Service as a first step towards the reorganisation of the broadcasting groups, SEBAC (N.S.W.) has taken the view that the proposed changes (as presented) would be likely to lead management into great difficulties without offering any compensating benefit for the communities.

Removing the co-ordinator from an active management role to a purely advisory one could, in many instances, be destructive of the efficiency, keenness, dedication and team spirit that has been built over the past three odd years.

The distribution of control, as envisaged, is more than likely to create factions within the various communities, while destroying continuity in programming.

For these reasons, SEBAC feels that SBS, rather than implementing an across-the-board reorganisation, would be better advised to evaluate the performance of each team in terms of the objectives that have already been defined for Ethnic Radio. Remedial action should then be taken in accordance with needs. Only this way the transition would be accomplished with minimal conflict and danger.

In the discussion paper the SBS states it hopes to achieve a more responsive, open and dynamic system of operation; a greater degree of community participation; it talks of accountability to Ethnic Communities and society at large; of the need to raise standards of broadcast; of the needs for a Review Committee to be established. Fine. But if the SBS hopes to achieve all this by bringing over 200 broadcasters under its direct control, and by relegating co-ordinators to advisory roles, it has presented no rationale in support of this proposed approach. SEBAC sees the likelihood of an increased degree of debate, or even confrontation, between broadcasters and co-ordinators over the vaguer boundaries of responsibilities.

SEBAC appreciates the concern of the Special Broadcasting Service with regards to public accountability, standards, publisher's responsibility, but it cannot help feeling that a bureaucratic solution cannot solve, with a single stroke, problems of creative nature, of cultural differentiation, of relationship between individuals and communities, and between communities and communities. If anything, there is need for a more real form of consultation between SBS and the communities through their natural instrumentalities, the SEBACS, which ought to be part of the decision making processes if they are to serve the purpose for which they were established.

On the other hand, it was noted that any existing deficiencies have been squarely attributed to co-ordinators and broadcasters; no mention is made, even in passing, of the fact that the organisation of the radio station's structure might be faulty and requiring remedial action. From the many reports received, and from the direct experience of some members of SEBAC (N.S.W.), it would seem as if a high degree of ad hocery is also pervading the running of the station.

THE DETAILS

On page 3, the SBS states it wishes to achieve a "...widening of community participation..." but fails to explain what it means by such generalisation: does it mean the SBS would like to see an on-air participation by a greater number of groups or individuals who have or claim to have something to say and the right to say it? This would be tantamount to advocating access radio which, as we understand, Ethnic Radio is not. The Government was mindful of the danger of fanning political conflicts within some communities (as experienced when 3zz was in operation in Melbourne) in drafting the legislation governing Ethnic Radio.

Does the SBS therefore mean it wishes all community groups to be able to publicise their activities? If so, we recommend verification of who does and who doesn't provide air time for community affairs.

Or does it mean that more people from the community (each representing various interest groups) ought to be interviewed or asked for opinions? Again, it's a simple matter of verification and rectification where needed.

If, on the contrary, it means that the SBS would like to see more people involved professionally, it ought to be reminded that at this very moment there are more people involved in the production of most programmes than even recommended in the paper.

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SELECTION OF "BROADCASTERS" AND "CO-ORDINATORS"

The selection of Broadcasters is the first item under discussion. SEBAC (N.S.W.) found it ought to have followed not preceded the discussion on Co-ordinators; whether the role of Co-ordinator be that of advisor (in a general sense), producer (in a professional sense) or a combination of both. The Committee feels they are and must remain the hinges of the operation. Thus it is proposed that Co-ordinators be discussed before Broadcasters.

In the discussion paper, Co-ordinators are nominally presented as "a major link between their respective communities, management and broadcasters". But, in redefining their role, the SBS states they would be expected to "advise" management and broadcasters on administrative matters and to "consult" with broadcasters on matters of programme format, cultural input, religious input, sporting interests, community announcements, ethnic flavour and balance. Does this mean that, after the Co-ordinators have offered their "consultation", each broadcaster decides for himself?

Following on from this, by way of logic (even if it represents a digression according to the sequence of the paper) we come to the statement that "final control over the areas of news, current affairs, community and welfare information, would be the responsibility of the station management". Not only does "station management" need to be defined a little more precisely, but it must be explained if it will be up to the various broadcasters (independently producing their news bulletins or current affairs programmes or welfare information) to present copy for the approval of station management. If so, in what language? To whom in particular? How long before broadcasting time? All of this seems highly unsatisfactory and rather messy. It is also impractical. For these reasons SEBAC(N.S.W.) feels very strongly that

a) Co-ordinators be considered the Executive Producers of all programmes produced by their language group, and that they be sided (when required) by a cultural advisor for each distinct cultural group existing within that linguistic context (i.e. Arabic comprises such diverse national groups as the Lebanese, the Egyptians, the Syrians, the Sudanese etc.; French is spoken in France, Belgium, Canada, Mauritius etc.) if such group is sufficiently differentiated or numerically consistent.

b) Co-ordinators accept final responsibility for all that is contained in the programmes produced under their direction and that they be answerable to the SBS.

SEBAC accepts the principle that the position of Co-ordinator be advertised; it also accepts that the tenure be limited to one year. But it recommends that Co-ordinators be not asked to step down unless new applicants provide convincing proof of professional skills and/or community backing. It is felt a situation could arise when an existing co-ordinator, slighted by the request to step down without due cause, might not re-present his/her candidature possibly leaving the SBS with less competent substitutes.

In any event, SEBAC would want to see an element of "community choice" in the appointment of co-ordinators in as much as, irrespective of any other consideration, it is that community for which the services are being provided. They would obviously wish co-ordinators to be attuned to their sense of expectation, whatever that might be. SEBAC also agrees that the co-ordinator may be a broadcaster, though this need not be necessarily the case; it also agrees that co-ordinators receive a fee.

BROADCASTERS

For reasons which are obviously not just semantic, SEBAC feels rather perplexed by the lack of professional precision in the definition of "broadcasters" (as well as "programme officers"). It is not understood why Ethnic Radio, which should hopefully be moving towards a structure similar to that of any other station, should not define the role of these "broadcasters" as producers, assistant producers, copywriters, translators, announcers, newscasters, researchers and commentators.

It would seem, on the contrary, that the discussion paper favours a system by which various broadcasters and their collaborators are allotted a certain number of programmes in the course of which they continue operating in various capacities, according to need or convenience.

SEBAC recommends the allocation of all programmes, as a whole, to a group. This would guarantee a rational distribution of subject matter while ensuring continuity. It would also result in the creation of radio-teams in which the various skills would become more specialised in the interest of professionalism.

It is quite obvious that, because of the limited number of hours allotted to each group, financial considerations (on the side of SBS as well as that of the "broadcasters") would favour people with more than one skill. But this need not necessarily be so. Furthermore, there is an enormous difference between programmes run on a daily basis and those run periodically; there is also an enormous difference between the type of format required for old established audiences (heavily culturally-oriented) and newly established communities (heavy on information and news).

The selection of broadcasters, according to SEBAC, ought to involve the co-ordinator who is to be part of the "auditioning" committee.

This committee should comprise 2 members of the SBS, 1 expert in the specific skill, 1 expert in the relevant language and culture, 1 member of SEBAC and the co-ordinator.

MINIMUM NUMBERS OF "BROADCASTERS"

SEBAC does not object to the proposed "minimum" but finds it difficult to read such terms as "reasonable number of participants within practical limits". What are they and who determines them? Requirements vary from programme to programme. Is there a "maximum"?

As indicated before, most groups have a larger number of contributors than recommended by the SBS. We reiterate the advice that they be professionally differentiated so as to constitute a team; as to the number, that it be left to the co-ordinator/producer.

SPOUSES AND RELATIVES

With regards to the clause about spouses and close relatives, SEBAC finds that the paper does not specify whether they, in being counted as one unit, would also receive payment as if they were one person. In which case it would not only be in breach of non-discriminatory practice, but also of established equity procedures. The Committee believes that, if a person is found capable of providing the required skills he or she is entitled to such reward and time entitlement as are available to others.

PROGRAMME OFFICERS

As indicated, the objection regarding the generalised definition of "broadcasters" applies also to programme officers. It would be conducive to a better understanding of roles, and to a more effective operational procedure, if programme officers were re-employed in specific roles more in tune with normal radio-station practice.

SEBAC also found objectionable that programme officers be automatically considered candidates for the role of producers of "English" programmes, since they were not employed on the basis of specific skills in that field.

The absence of a Station Manager was noted. This makes operational procedures and responsibility rather fractured, unreliable and inconsistent.

As to the role of programme officers in "ethnic" broadcasting, SEBAC feels that, in principle, they ought not to be involved, however, in this transitional period, consideration could be given with regards to past performance.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, SEBAC wishes to underline the SBS's own stated intention to bring about changes only "where necessary", while recommending that the final decision be based on practical requirements rather than bureaucratic expediency.

Finally, the consensus was also reached on the advisability of a training scheme for broadcasters.

POST SCRIPTUM

In the course of the proceedings, a document was tabled regarding the cost of production of one broadcast hour, with bilingual contents, in the United States; it amounted to \$1,400, of which \$800 represented the cost of translations.

Without wishing to make direct comparisons, SEBAC felt the SBS ought to look at the whole question of payment to broadcasters with a more just and realistic approach than at present. Any demand of improved performance must be accompanied by adequate financial rewards. The amount of money at present allocated (\$55) for each hour broadcast would not cover the cost of translating the news bulletin at official government rates.

The Chairman
State Ethnic Broadcasting Advisory Committee

Pino Bosi
