



## Reflecting on Student Radio Work: Stories from the Studios

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### ABSTRACT

This article sets out to illuminate an often-overlooked aspect of radio broadcasting, the experiences of its workers. It uses the reflections of workers from student radio in New Zealand to discuss the profound impact working in this sector has had on the lives of these people. We do this by conducting a thematic analysis of online survey feedback in order to understand how student radio work shaped the lives of the respondents. This article is designed to center the place of workers and their experiences in media organizations and of media work. The article interrogates the life-long impacts of working in student radio in terms of workers' careers, wellbeing and sense of belonging to a unique community. It does this by drawing thematic conclusions about student radio as a space for developing purpose, identity and belonging, a catalyst for the independent music scene and a breeding ground for creativity and media careers. This led to a lifelong passion for student radio and a lasting legacy for student radio workers.

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### Introduction

The purpose of this article is to illuminate an often-overlooked aspect of radio broadcasting, the experiences of workers. More specifically, this article uses the reflections of workers from student radio in New Zealand to discuss the profound impact working in this sector has had on the lives of these people. We do this by conducting a thematic analysis of online survey feedback using Carminati's (2018) interpretivist framework with generalizability of the results as the core aim of the study. The discussion presented here broadens our understanding of media work and the potential of media systems that are designed to be alternatives to mainstream offerings for workers and audiences.

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### Contextualizing Student Radio in New Zealand

New Zealand was the first nation to enact legislation to consolidate government control of radio broadcasting with the 1903 Wireless Telegraphy Act (Hoar, 2012, p. 3). This control lasted until the late 1960s, when the pirate broadcaster *Radio Hauraki* managed to break the government monopoly over radio after 1111 days at sea, forcing legislators to open up radio spectrum to commercial operators (Blackburn, 1994). The significant deregulation of radio in the late 1980s, combined with the geographic realities of a long skinny landmass over two major islands with alpine and volcanic ranges running down the middle that limit broadcast coverage means that New Zealand has over 1000 radio frequencies operating today (Mollgaard and R, 2022,

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p. 89). Radio in New Zealand is highly diverse, very competitive and roughly evenly divided across the available radio spectrum with both market-driven competition for niche consumer audiences in the commercial sector and a strong public service ethos across indigenous, community, public and student broadcasting (2022; Mollgaard & R, 2021). 40

Student radio in New Zealand began in 1969 as a university graduation stunt, broadcasting from a borrowed and barely seaworthy boat off the upper east coast of Auckland, New Zealand's largest city (Brown, 2016). Brought ashore and shut down by the police, transmission resumed in the early 70s from the University of Auckland campus with the station specializing in new local and music not heard elsewhere on the dial, driven by a group of volunteers keen to express themselves and experiment on the airwaves. 45

Over the next 15 years, student radio stations were established at university campuses around the country: 95bFM in Auckland, RDU in Christchurch, Radio Active in Wellington, Contact FM in Hamilton, Radio Control in Palmerston North, and Radio One in Dunedin (Joyce, 2021, p. 126). These stations morphed from restricted, short-term broadcasts during specific university events into full-time, continuous broadcasts – thanks to the concerted efforts of passionate individuals who fought to secure specialist radio spectrum licenses, much to the annoyance of incumbent broadcasters (Mollgaard & Neill, 2023, pp. 18–25). 50 55

From its inception, the very existence of student radio and what it was meant to be doing was challenged by the wider broadcasting industry. This came from commercial broadcasters, who saw it as a threat to bottom lines, and from the public broadcaster, which saw it as undermining its position as the preeminent government-backed radio system. As one public radio broadcaster, Nigel Horrocks, noted, 60

Student radio was actually set up in this country to initially provide student news and information. It was set out for specific times such as orientation week, now what's happened is student radio is almost round-the-clock 52 weeks of the year and unfortunately what has not happened is perhaps the continuation of or the exploration of student news and information. (Radio with Pictures, 1987) 65

Initially, license restrictions limited the amount of music stations could play, by requiring a balance of informative content for the intended student audience. Over time, this changed to a reliance on filling airtime by playing music. Student radio responded to industry criticism of its music-heavy programming by citing a lack of resources, with (then) Chairman of the National Association of Student Broadcasters, Graham Cockroft, saying; “To do interesting talk items you generally need a substantial amount of resources . . . It's far easier to play a record than to produce a three-minute talk show” (Radio with Pictures, 1987). 70

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Early license restrictions also meant that student radio stations were not permitted to run commercials, relying solely on financial support from their universities and the student unions they were embedded in to make ends meet. Licensing conditions changed during the deregulation periods of the late 80s and early 90s with relaxation of government controls. Stations were then allowed to offer advertising of “special relevance to students” (Tribunal, 1981), and sponsorship opportunities. However, the ability to generate revenue remained constrained by a highly deregulated media environment and intense competition for advertising dollars. 75 80

These financial pressures were already evident in the late 1980s. In 1989, Hamilton's Contact FM was forced to close after its student union, struggling to maintain funding, subleased the station's frequency to a commercial operator (Mollgaard & Neill, 2023). This marked an early example of how economic strain and shifting institutional priorities could sever the ties between student radio and its campus origins. 85

Today, student radio in New Zealand largely exists independently of its original campus homes. Of the five remaining stations, only three are still based on university campuses, and just two continue to receive some financial support from their student unions. Union support had decreased significantly after a 2012 government legislative change that made student membership voluntary (Brett Kelly, 2023). This shift in connections between student radio and the university structures they originally flourished in had a significant impact on the content and sustainability of student radio and changed how it is funded and programmed. 90 95

Following the closure of Contact FM, the New Zealand government moved to financially support student radio by recognizing its impact for audiences and the creative economy. Through its media funding agency, NZ On Air, the government supported student radio as a source of news and content for younger audiences and as "a platform for alternative local music" (NZ On Air, n.d.). Stations received subsidies in recognition of their significant contribution to local music, with playlists exceeding 50% New Zealand-made content. This was something that commercial networks, driven by national audiences and commercial imperatives, were unable to achieve (Mollgaard & Neill, 2023). 100

The stations were the catalyst that brought local music communities together, with those communities providing a constant source of fresh musical content. While new shows reflected current shifts in music genres, core programming continued to honor each station's local musical roots – from Dunedin's indie rock scene to Christchurch's electronica base to Palmerston North's experimental music scenes. This dynamic between new and heritage elements was also echoed in the stations' volunteer bases. Some volunteers contributed during their student years, while others remained involved for decades – all bonded by the shared experience of working in student radio (Mollgaard & Neill, 2023). 105 110

In an increasingly fragmented media landscape, people remain the one constant in student radio, with many maintaining a deep and enduring connection to *their* station – its past, present, and future. Yet, little attention has been given to the workers who continue to keep these stations running, and there is a dearth of material exploring what their work has brought to the station communities – and the impact on their own lives. 115

This article forefronts the voices of current and former staff and volunteers of student radio in New Zealand, capturing their reflections, motivations, and experiences. In doing so, it highlights their critical role in the survival of this important sector of the New Zealand media system and adds further nuance to ongoing interest in the impact of student radio worldwide. 120

## Relevant Recent Studies of Student Radio

Recent work that unfolds the story of student radio in different national and cultural contexts include Brian Fauteux's *Beyond campus borders: Canadian campus radio and community representation on the FM dial* (2013) and *Campus frequencies: "Alternativeness" and Canadian campus radio* (Fauteux, 2015). *Beyond campus borders* 125

explores early attempts by Canadian students to organize a radio presence across three key stations which evolved from more insular and inward looking radio clubs and closed-circuit efforts to broadcast audio, to more community orientated FM stations with broader mandates to support music and local student and youth programming, meaning “a community-based mandate that anchors a station within musical and cultural communities is a distinguishing characteristic of the Canadian campus radio sector” (p.149), both the inception and the specific mandates around music and community aligns with student radio development in New Zealand. 130

Fauteux’s *Campus frequencies* (Fauteux, 2015) also reflects a debate still alive today around the meaning of “alternativeness,” and its value to student radio programming. In particular, the clash of values as “the nature of ‘alternativeness’ is complicated when bands generate success and drift toward larger record labels and mainstream industry practices” (p. 34). Ultimately, for Fauteux, the notion of alternatives is both idealistic and obfusatory of the wider power structures of the broadcasting and cultural systems they are embedded in. This again reflects the experience of student radio stations in New Zealand that walk a tightrope between championing “alternative” bands to successful careers while avoiding becoming too “mainstream” for audiences seeking new, and alternative music and cultural moments and balancing media policy and funding dilemmas to stay on air. 135 140

Ari Hautaniemi’s *Balancing the Turbulence: Organizational Values in European Student Radio* (Hautaniemi, 2024b) explores the cultural values of European student radio, finding a complex interplay between creativity, organizational demands, management structures and motivations for participating that drive European student radio toward a mixture of “clan, adhocracy and hierarchical cultures” (p. 294) that demonstrate the structural challenges of European student radio through cultural and organizational frameworks. This study reveals the competing pressures of individual and group cultural values, hierarchy versus adhocracy approaches, and commercial market orientations encroaching on free expression. 145 150

Hautaniemi also forefronts the key strengths and also weaknesses of student radio in *Organizational artefacts in European student radio: Exploring the organizational culture of student radio in Europe* (2024), exploring the nature of creating a media system with an ever-changing roster of volunteers, resource scarcity and the need to stay relevant and attractive to stakeholders such as funders, student organizations and the institutions they are embedded in, noting that student radio “must deal with a significant amount of uncertainty and change” that creates these “various partly competing cultures” (p. 310), situations recognizable to New Zealand student radio operators too. 155 160

Katherine Rye Jewell traverses the rich history of college radio across in the United States in *Live from the Underground: A History of College Radio* (2023). Jewell engages with a fraught history of development of a “cultural and market force” (xiii) in a highly competitive and strictly regulated market, at a time when these stations were emerging as critical partners for the music industries – both mainstream and more specialist scenes. These stations were also often confronted by their own prominence in breaking new artists and leading the formation of new alternative music scenes, leading to confusion and debate about their role both inside and outside the organizations during the rise and solidification of Reaganomics and its successors (pp. 302–24). There is also the sometimes-pernicious influence of university economics weaved through the history of these stations, as their profitability determined their survival, or not. This experience 165 170

is not unique to the US, with the need to conform to the economic whims of tertiary education institutions a reoccurring theme through most studies of student/college/campus radio worldwide. 175

This is true of our own study of New Zealand student radio stations “*Other stations are shit*”: *Student radio in Aotearoa New Zealand* (Mollgaard & Neill, 2023). While this study has a significant focus on the people, music and cultural milieu of student radio in New Zealand through the lenses on the five individual stations, the financial pressures of operating these services as part of a university that led to various degrees of disconnect from their original campuses and student-led organizations is a common theme. Tough financial situations and unsympathetic student unions and university administrators are integral to the development of these stations as cash-poor but culturally rich centers of innovation in the arts, current affairs and political diversity. 180

Joyce (2021) examines the critical impact of the New Zealand student radio stations on local music in *Student radio: “A good friend of New Zealand music”* (pp. 125–43), utilizing the extensive study of US college radio and its impact on the independent or “indie” music scenes of the US, particularly in the 1980s and 90s, to construct an ecology of the influence of student radio on independent music in new Zealand (p. 129). Joyce’s work with musicians who were seeking support from radio to further their careers complements “*Other Stations are Shit*”, in that it both informed some of our thinking around the influence of student radio on alternative and emergent New Zealand music and provided a counterpoint to our study of student radio organizations and workers. “A Good Friend of New Zealand Music” is unique and informative in that it privileges the voices of musicians as beneficiaries of student radio activity and makes connections between the local influence of student radio and the possibility of national and potential international success for the alternative music they support in an increasingly complex digital media environment. 185

This study is designed to add to both the discourse around the student radio experience in New Zealand, and the broader discussion of student/campus/college radio and more generalizable theories of alternative media systems and their participants offered by our analysis. 190

## Methodology 195

The purpose of this research was to produce a generalizable thematic analysis of the impact of working in alternative media contexts, derived from the detailed reflections of participants in these systems. The New Zealand student radio context provided us with a rich data set from which to explore these impacts in detail and create theory that would be useful for understanding how alternative media systems can be studied through the individuals who choose to participate in them. 200

## Data Gathering 205

During 2022 we conducted research into the five student radio stations in New Zealand and their audiences for a larger study of student radio in New Zealand, using a two-tiered qualitative approach of semi-structured interviews with 10 student radio leaders, including managers and content directors, and by way of an online survey, which was open to the 210

general public and promoted by the radio stations on air and through their Web sites, newsletters and social media activity. The survey attracted 62 responses during the 2 months it was conducted. 215

This design used a narrative/reflective framework to explore the story of student radio in ways that made what was discovered accessible for a broad audience but also provided space for unique revelations from each of the different station's workers and audiences that could then be analyzed in depth to provide nuanced observations of both the stations and the whole student radio system in New Zealand for the study. 220

While the data was limited to what respondents chose to share in the survey, as we did not directly interview respondents, the static nature of the online survey did provide the time and space for respondents to offer rich and thoughtful reflections that aligned meaningfully with the narrative/reflective framework design of the research methodology. 225

The use of an online survey and interviews in this mixed-method design was influenced by the work of Braun et al. (2020), who argued for the value and richness of online surveys in a mixed-method approach, beyond what was the traditional use of them for gathering largely demographic information to enhance other qualitative approaches such as interviewing and focus groups. Their approach contends that the online survey can and should provide a "wide-angle lens" (p. 643) on a subject, providing for nuanced and complex insights that cannot be generated in other ways. Key reasons for this are the relative safety of replying to a survey in depth without a researcher in the personal space of the respondent that "encourages disclosure" (p. 644) and the practical benefits of doing it from a location and at a time convenient to the respondent (p. 645). They also argued for not taking an "either/or" approach to qualitative research design, but instead considering the best mix of methods for each new project, based on what sample size and type was desired, what the research question(s) demanded in terms of fluidity and complexity of responses and how the data was to be analyzed in conjunction with other data gathered for the project by different methods (pp. 647–50). 230 235 240

A key insight here is in question design, which traditionally followed a pattern using more structured and focused questions in the online survey and more open-ended questions in semi-structured interviews. Braun et al. (2020) found that having a final open-ended question in the online survey was "inviting participants to share anything else they think, or feel is important, but that we have not anticipated in our questions. This often generates unanticipated and useful data" (p. 648). It is from the final, open-ended question in our online survey of student radio audiences that we have derived the themes discussed here. 245 250

### Asking for Stories

The online survey had a total of 11 questions, which included gathering demographic information about respondents, their affiliations with student radio, their thoughts on the impact of student radio across music, culture and politics in New Zealand and their thoughts on possible futures for the stations. These insights informed the book *'Other stations are shit': Student radio in Aotearoa New Zealand* (Mollgaard & Neill, 2023). The final qualitative solicitation in the survey generated responses we thought deserved deeper 255

analysis and explication than could be incorporated in the book, so the answers were not included, and unexamined, until this project. This last section of the survey said:

*Please tell us any stories about your experiences with student radio.*

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This section garnered a total of 30 responses that included rich personal reflections on the student radio experience from current but mainly former student radio workers, which were most respondents (25/30). The other five respondents were listeners, rather than workers, so not considered here.

This relatively large cohort of respondents was unexpected when we were in the research design phase, as we (incorrectly) assumed that most respondents would be listeners who wanted to celebrate their devotion to student radio. Instead, we were given a unique opportunity to consider the impact of student radio on a group of workers who had never given voice to their experience in a structured research context before. This a significant and unique data set that reveals much about how those “at the coal face” of student radio understand what they were doing, why it was important to them, and how it influenced their lives both during and after their experiences in these environments.

### **Thematic Analysis as the Frame for Generalizability**

This large and detailed corpus of data presents challenges in interpretation, particularly in reaching thematic clarity and in generalization of the results, so that they may be meaningful, reliable and transferable, which was the core philosophy of this project. Using a “general inductive approach” (Thomas, 2003) to analyze the stories offered, they revealed striking similarities in experiences across respondents, and particular themes emerged from responses consistently throughout the data set. Both researchers employed independent parallel coding of the 25 stories received first, then developed the coding further together to provide coding consistency checks as themes emerged from the stories (Thomas, 2003, p. 244). The individual appraisals were remarkably consistent, as the experiences related were very similar across the individual responses. This allowed us to reliably develop the thematic strands that emerged in the analysis stages and to select several excellent representative quotes to demonstrate our findings.

Our final analytical approach was to group these core recurring motifs into thematic baskets that included the most significant reflections discussed across the largest number of respondents to confirm generalizability of the results. By seeking to understand the experiences of these individuals and to then relate these to the other respondent’s experiences, we fulfill the two key criteria for producing generalizability of thematic inquiry according to Carminati (2018) – generalizability as the aim of the study (p. 2095) and a clear philosophical approach, in this case an interpretivist frame of “understanding of how individuals, through their narratives, perceive and experience their lives” (pp. 2096–98) and then construct meanings from their own social contexts. This design for generalizability drove the thematic constructions we now discuss, informed by the vivid individual reflections on working in student radio stations offered to us by the respondents to the survey.

## Findings

Most contributors identified themselves as former hosts or DJs, with several also having held the key leadership role of station manager, one of the few paid roles on stations. Many volunteered in different areas of radio, including creative writing, news, audio production, and programming. Notably, nearly all contributors also described themselves as current listeners, reflecting an enduring connection to the station. 300

It was clear from the stories offered by these workers that student radio is more than just a platform for playing music. The feedback showed it as a cultural hub, a creative incubator, and a social lifeline for many of the people involved. The stories shared by contributors illustrate how these stations became essential spaces for artistic expression, career development, and personal growth. There is also evidence of a lasting impact on careers, relationships and perceptions of the value of volunteer labor that has lasted years, and even decades, after the original experiences of the respondents. Here, we elucidate the key themes that unified the respondents' conceptions of the value of their work and what it meant to them after the experiences they described. 305 310

### Student Radio as a Space for Developing Purpose, Identity and Belonging

For many contributors, student radio provided a sense of purpose and identity at a time when they might have otherwise felt lost, particularly for young people coming to university, often leaving the family home and the continuity of friendships and local communities to move to another place to study. One respondent explicitly stated that 95bFM “gave me a reason to stay at university beyond just attending classes.” Another described it as “a place where I found my people,” which was a common strand running throughout the stories we received. 315 320

Some of this was finding communities of taste around music and culture that had a presence at the station, and some of it was the open-door policy of the stations – always looking for volunteers to keep the program on air and to help out behind the scenes writing news and commercials, programming the music and generally helping the stations to function. The local student station became a home for those who didn't fit into the traditional university lifestyle, offering a community that supported them both personally and creatively. One respondent personifies this in stating: 325

It was an amazing time with some great people whom I consider my real friends. I have had a community take me under their wing and support me. I live with people I volunteered with. Many of my best friends came through bFM. [It] changed my life and is something I hold as deeply as my own family. 330

Beyond individual friendships, student radio created a shared identity and belonging for entire generations of volunteers. One contributor recalls, “It felt like being part of a secret society that only a few people really understood, but those who did really cared.” Even years later, alumni return and feel nostalgic about their time at these stations, showing that the cultural impact extends well beyond university years. One contributor observed that “It has been over 25 years since I worked in student radio, and many of the talented people I worked with went on to have some very successful careers in radio and similar fields.” 335

For many contributors, the formative experiences and relative creative freedom of working in student radio with others who are also trying out new ways of doing things still resonates many years after in their working lives, with examples such as “I consider my time at bFM to be formative, an essential passage to my adult career as a writer and creator” illustrative of the deep impact student radio work had on participants lives. 340

Being part of a student radio station impacted on volunteer workers in profound ways, helping them find direction and a sense of achievement in their daily work. One contributor reflected: “For me student radio was the environment within which I found I was really good at something . . . I had complete carte blanche to write and record whatever I wanted . . . I got paid for that!” 345

This supportive space to develop was critical to a sense of personal achievement and career development, with many respondents noting that the ability to be oneself and to be supported by others in doing that led to satisfying careers they cared about; “[I] loved the Saturday night slot . . . I had the chance to interview some cool musicians and every job I’ve had since then has been in the music industry.” 350

There is a clear sense throughout the stories we received that the student radio experience was still important for those who had been part of it. There was a mix of pride, nostalgia and fondness for the communities formed around student radio stations that was deeply felt and not forgotten – as one contributor notes, they were places where “many people found their tribe.” 355

## A Catalyst for the Independent Music Scene

A key function of student radio has been to champion independent music. Several contributors discussed how the stations were the first to introduce now-iconic bands, such as R. E.M., the Violent Femmes, and The Chills to audiences. One former DJ reminisced, “I remember playing [New Zealand band] The Clean for the first time and thinking, “This is the future.”” 360

Stations were deeply embedded in their local music scenes – not just by playing independent music but by actively supporting it by hosting live gigs and music festivals, providing a testing ground for new artists, producing and distributing promotional recordings for indie bands, and creating a tight-knit music community where bands, sound engineers, and DJs could collaborate. This support was critical in growing music scenes that offered alternatives to mainstream popular music, particularly in regional centers, which were often overlooked in the national music conversation. As one contributor noted, “If it wasn’t for student radio, half the bands we loved would never have been heard outside their garage.” 365 370

Live performances and interviews with musicians were a cornerstone of student radio programming frequently highlighted in reflections from former hosts and some of their most vivid experiences: “Trinity Roots would always bring an awesome feed in when they were interviewed. I remember first thing in the morning at 8 am they brought in a massive BBQ meat dish - it was delicious!” And another, “My very first live interview ended up being one of my hip hop idols, King Kapisi. I was so nervous, but I still to this day relish finding out live on air that his very first pseudonym was MC Bran Muffin. It was a glorious moment.” These interviews also gave glimpses into the personalities behind the music, as 375 380

one contributor recalled, “I loved it when we had Don McGlashan in the studio . . . he started ‘playing’ a vacuum cleaner tube! He was a very funny man.”

The stations offered students a unique platform to explore creative approaches to music programming, often through free-form shows with minimal playlist constraints. This gave DJs the freedom to shape the station’s musical direction and showcase their own personal tastes. The result was a rich array of specialist shows, driven by enthusiastic volunteers. A former host of Contact FM’s Women’s Show recalled: “I moved the show away from a format which was staunchly feminist into a genre-based show with a strong emphasis on female musicians be they solo artists or member of bands which could have had more males than female members. I did make a point of stating how the songs linked into the women’s show pre or post song.” This flexibility gave DJs a sense of ownership over their programming and offered an opportunity to cultivate new listeners.

Importantly, specialist music programming opened the airwaves to new and diverse forms of music. One contributor recalled being described as “a champion for hip hop music as a genre on the station,” and later, as an advocate for local hip hop artists. Student stations were often credited with breaking musical boundaries, for instance, reggae and dub featured heavily in Wellington, while hip hop gained prominence in Christchurch throughout the 90s (Mollgaard & Neill, 2023).

Over time, stations became synonymous with their distinctive sounds, championed by passionate DJs who played a vital role in engaging and expanding diverse musical communities. The pride felt by contributors to student radio’s music programming was a universal theme across responses, with many contributors reflecting on the positive impact of shaping the station’s sound and supporting local music as a highlight of their time in student radio

## **A Breeding Ground for Creativity and Media Careers**

Amidst the eclectic mix of local and alternative music were the creative contributions of student radio writers. Free from the conventions of commercial radio, writers were able to express themselves with humor and originality, crafting content that connected authentically with their audiences – something that was immensely satisfying. One contributor called their role as Creative Director at bFM “the best job I ever had. I spent my whole day writing funnies.” They recalled spending an entire day writing one hilarious sketch, which was then played repeatedly on-air because it was so well loved. “We just played it over and over again and pissed our pants with laughter all day long.”

The personal fulfillment writers found in the creative freedom underscores how the station was more than just a job – it was a deeply rewarding experience that connected them to their passions, their sense of humor, and a like-minded community. There was also a notable absence of commercial pressure in contrast to mainstream radio that is driven by ratings, profitability, and a set schedule. The writer’s role as Creative Director at bFM was devoid of such pressures. Instead, the focus was on content quality and personal expression, reinforcing student radio’s unique advantage, which lies in its capacity to prioritize passion over commercial success. “If I wrote one thing in a day that was just hilarious, nothing else was made that day.” The lack of pressure to produce a specific quantity of content highlights the contrast between the carefree, creative environment of student radio and the high-

pressure world of mainstream broadcasting, where creatives are expected to produce a steady stream of work, with little concern for aesthetic quality or artistic expression. 425

Student radio also allowed for cultural subversion and significant experimentation. One contributor reflected on a prank involving a supposed “fly-repellent frequency” played on-air as one example of how these stations blended humor and mythmaking into their identity. “People actually called in to ask when we’d play it again. It became part of the station’s lore.” The station was a space where unconventional music and ideas could flourish without corporate interference, giving a voice to non-mainstream, underground, and countercultural movements. 430

A creative idea that made media headlines in 2021 centered on a bFM radio advertisement that ironically explained how to file a complaint with the Broadcasting Standards Authority (BSA). The ad itself became the subject of a complaint, with accusations that it breached broadcasting standards – specifically those relating to good taste and decency. It read: 435

At this radio station we do our utmost to abide by the Broadcasting Standards Authority and their rules and guidelines. If you seriously think we’ve crossed the line on air, give us a call on 309 4831 and tell us about it. We’ll be able to help you out and tell you the procedure if you wish to make a formal complaint to the Broadcasting Standards Authority. Fuck-knuckles, cock and piss, balls. Thank you (BSA, 2021).<sup>1</sup> 440

The BSA did not uphold the complaint, noting the tone of the segment aligned with the expectation of the station’s audience. In its response, the station added: “The promo spot you mention has been part of the fabric of the station for over 25 years. It’s so popular with our listenership, in fact, that we were asked to turn it into a limited-edition t-shirt - it then became one of our best-selling merchandise items” (BSA, 2021). 445

Student radio’s ability to resonate with its audience could be heard in its authentic on-air presentation style – unscripted, unpolished, and often entertaining banter from a mix of fresh – and experienced – on air talent. One contributor commented that it felt more relatable because the hosts were often students themselves, immersed in the same culture and conversations as their audience, something mainstream radio often struggles to replicate. 450

The organic nature of student radio also shaped how it delivered news and information. One contributor singled out a favorite segment – the local surf report which featured “two guys out on the waves who knew nothing about surfing, doing everything the exact opposite of what real surfers would do. Very funny.” Student radio can also make space for more somber moments, with one contributor remembering a Sunday night talkback session following a student’s death enroute to a school ball. “The host took one long call from a series of the boy’s friends allowing them to share their thoughts and feelings about the tragedy. It was really moving and profound, like an impromptu public wake.” 455

While limited resources have sometimes prevented student radio from (as one contributor put it) being able to “dive into deeper and more exclusive stories” it remains a vital platform for sharing information that resonates with its audience. As another commented, it is “a great avenue for students to know what’s happening in their country!” 460

A recurring theme in the stories shared was the ability of student radio to approach important issues in fresh and creative ways – with politics highlighted by several respondents. One contributor reflected on how student radio helped to demystify politics, saying “it took the grey dulness outta politics and made politicians more relatable. Another gave the example of Former Prime Minister Helen Clark, who had regular slots on several 465

student stations for free-form chats about government initiatives, recalling their fortnightly 470  
conversations:

She never needed to be briefed on the content we'd plan to talk about with her - I mean let's face  
it, she was 100 times smarter and more capable than me as a 20 something year old. Good PR  
for her, obviously, but it was a fun segment and probably helped the station's overall relevance.

Student radio workers were proud of providing ways for politicians to connect with younger 475  
audiences, especially when media options for youth connecting to politicians are limited. As  
one contributor put it: "They made themselves available to us ... it was a chance to get  
a sense of who they actually were." Another particularly liked the chance to go "face to face"  
with politicians saying, "It didn't need to be orchestrated or scripted, we just went for it!"

The hands-on experience was a defining feature of student radio and embodied the 480  
journalistic tradition of "learning on the job," with many contributors crediting the  
experience as a launching pad into professional media careers. As one noted,

Student radio has been a beginning for voices that have not taken a traditional journalism or 485  
broadcasting education pathway to the mainstream. Those involved in student radio often find  
themselves engaged initially as a hobby, that then gets serious.

Student radio's dual roles as a platform for creativity and a pipeline into the media industry 490  
remain central to its enduring relevance, sustained by the passion of those who continue to  
shape it, on and off the air. This was raised by several respondents, who noted that the  
opportunities given to student radio contributors could not be found in any other media  
organization.

## Conclusion: A Lifelong Passion and a Lasting Legacy

Many of the contributors describe student radio as the first place they discovered and 495  
nurtured their creative talents. It provided a rare opportunity for students to experiment  
with music programming with free-form shows with minimal playlists that allowed the DJs  
to shape the station's musical identity and contribute to local music scenes. Others honed  
their journalism skills by interviewing artists, covering student issues, and producing news  
content. Other creatives practiced their craft by writing comedy and ad scripts, learning  
sound engineering and production as well as setting up gigs, handling live recordings, and  
producing other audio content – practices that are readily accessible to student radio  
contributors and add new skills and rich experiences to people developing professional 500  
careers in the media, creative and music industries.

Their insights paint a picture of student radio as a vibrant, supportive, and creatively 505  
liberating environment. Contributors shared similar experiences that reflect the importance of  
freedom, joyful collaboration, and creative expression within such spaces. Unlike the con-  
straints of commercial radio, student stations offered an outlet for passion, humor, and  
innovation, allowing individuals to discover and develop their talents without the usual  
pressures of mainstream media. Through the contributors' reflections, there is ample evidence  
that formative experiences in radio are deeply cherished, not only for their creativity but for  
the sense of community and personal growth they fostered, whether a contributor was still  
working at the station, or had been out of the environment for 25 years. 510

The ongoing impact of student radio on its workers lives, including on careers, friendships and sense of achievement and belonging is, we argue, thematically significant and generalizable, as per Carminati's method (Carminati, 2018). That said, it would be useful to investigate the experiences and reflections of other student radio workers in similar media ecologies, for example, college radio in the United States and campus radio in Australia, for thematic generalizations that may (or may not) resonate with our own discoveries, so as to further illuminate the benefits of student radio for personal creativity, wellbeing and career development. Jewell's history of college radio in the United States is informative here, with many of the reflections of past contributors (including herself) resonating with what is discussed by student radio contributors here – the universal themes of freedom of expression, developing new friendships, having fun with likeminded colleagues, the excitement of being involved in emerging music scenes and the thrill of having your creativity platformed on the air waves are notable across the two studies, providing good evidence for generalizability. 515

Ultimately, the experiences and reflections of the cohort of contributors analyzed here demonstrate that student radio is not just a university club, nor a job, and not just a hobby – it is an entire media ecosystem that is part of what shapes the cultural landscape of its time and the lives of those who work in it. It gives people another reason to be at university, an outlet for creative expression, a support network of like-minded individuals, and a direct hand in shaping New Zealand's independent music scene. As stations have evolved and spread into the new spaces of the digital age, their legacy is both developing and enduring in the people whose lives and careers are shaped by them, in the local music scenes they help build, and in the spirit of independent broadcasting that continues to inspire new generations to contribute to the student radio scene in New Zealand. 520 525 530

## Note 535

1. The BSA requires broadcasters to promote their complaints process on air.

## Disclosure Statement

Q2 No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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