

# On-air Online

Founding and Directing ACB Radio

Jonathan Mosen

Published by: Mosen Consulting

<http://mosen.org>

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### Keeping Up with Mosen Consulting Projects

“On-air Online” is just one of a number of eBooks, audio tutorials and webinars already available or soon planned for release.

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## About the Author

Jonathan Mosen has been a user of assistive technology for over 30 years. During that time, he has helped people make sense of technology through the founding of many e-mail lists and the production of numerous audio tutorials.

In 1999, Jonathan founded ACB Radio for the American Council of the Blind. While in this role, he created, presented, and produced the ground-breaking Main Menu assistive technology show. The show pre-dated the availability of podcasts, and produced two hours of assistive technology-related content each week, including insightful interviews with movers and shakers in the assistive technology industry.

Jonathan has been working in leading assistive technology companies for over a decade, and now also operates his own company, Mosen Consulting. Mosen Consulting provides assistive technology training and consultancy to individuals and agencies. He is also producing a range of assistive technology webinars and eBooks.

He is CEO of Appcessible.net, a company providing real-world end-user accessibility testing services to mobile application developers.

## Foreword

As the clock ticked over into the year 2000, our household was in a state of flux and change. Jonathan had left the Foundation for the Blind and we were expecting our third child. But new opportunities were beginning to present themselves.

Paul Edwards, then president of the ACB, had sown the seed when he was in New Zealand the previous year. The ACB were looking to set up a radio programme that would broadcast over the internet. They needed someone with a fairly unique skill set: a knowledge of broadcasting; the technical expertise to stream over the internet; and an innate understanding of blindness consumerism. Jonathan was the man, and *ACB Radio* was born.

We moved two and a half hours north-west to the small city of Whanganui – accommodation was cheap and the new way of connecting to the internet called *Broadband* was available. At that point nothing much else mattered. We bought a house that had been owned by a photographer, and it had a separate studio that we would convert into a broadcasting studio for Jonathan.

This was a great space, but it was big with lots of hard surfaces and no soft furnishings, and it had the acoustics of a cathedral! The first studio space we set up in there was a cubicle made from blankets pegged to clotheslines that were strung across the room. With the help and expertise of my step-father, we built a ‘proper’ studio with thick carpet on the floor and undulating sponge rubber on the walls.

*ACB Radio* was popular right from the start. The international blind community had a vehicle that was bringing them together in a very real way – in real time, and from the comfort of their own homes. The listeners would call-up in droves, despite the costs of international calls and the fact that, at least for some of them, it was the middle of the night.

*ACB Radio* grew from the initial programme to a three station syndicate. Jonathan could no longer run it entirely on his own, and it was not long before he was managing a large volunteer staff with people broadcasting from every far-flung corner of the globe.

From very humble beginnings, it is heartening to know that *ACB Radio* is still thriving fifteen years on.

Amanda Gough

a.k.a. Wife 1.0

## Introduction

As a technology buff with a history degree, it's no wonder I'm a fan of technology history. I believe it's important to both chronicle and celebrate where we've come from, and how we got here. People who create new services, or apply technology in new ways, are often too busy getting on with it at the time to realise that they're making history. But when the work is done, there's time to share how things happened, why things were done a particular way, and why things turned out as they did.

15 years ago to the day of this book's publication, I got home from a fish and chip lunch in time to press the button to launch [ACB Radio](#), the Internet radio service operated by the [American Council of the Blind](#). It is still operational today, a real testimony to the commitment of ACB to the service, and to all who have worked on it. My congratulations to all those currently involved in ACB Radio on such a great milestone. You can feel justifiably proud.

I always intended to write an account at some point that chronicles my memories of that exciting, pioneering time in blindness and Internet streaming technology. 15 years seems like about the right time to do it. The memories aren't too faded with the passing of time, but enough time has passed that I can reflect candidly on things. Enough distance now exists that I'm probably as objective about matters as I'm ever likely to be.

In conducting my research for this book, I've referred to written and audio records, but they are far from complete. There will be some omissions, and there'll inevitably be errors. These are due to my middle-aged brain, and so much happening when I was in the thick of it.

If you remember those early days of ACB Radio as a listener, were one of the amazing team members who became household names in the online blind community, or you're just interested in Internet broadcasting when it was much lower fidelity and far more "seat-of-the-pants" than it is now, I hope you enjoy my recollections.

## Chapter One: Setting the Scene

I've been asked over the years how it was that a guy from New Zealand ended up managing the Internet radio service of an American blind advocacy organisation. A fair question. Like many such projects, the origins are complex and multifaceted.

### Radio in the Blood

The radio aspect is simplest to explain. I had wanted to work in broadcasting for as long as I can remember. At age 4, I began calling talk radio, and eventually ended up being a regular guest on a local station that did talk content, giving me quite a high profile in my home city of Auckland.

Determined to make broadcasting my career, I decided to put a team together to establish a commercial radio station at the school for the blind when I was 18. It was fully funded by advertising revenue, and was granted a license to operate for two weeks. We repeated the exercise a year later, and made sure that as many of the key radio people in Auckland as possible came out to see the station in action, giving me great networks in the industry. I had already been exposed to the frustration and humiliation of discrimination, so I figured that I could either get angry and disillusioned about it, or take control of my destiny, start my own radio station and show them I could do it. It was a gamble that paid off.

While still at university completing my undergraduate degree, I gained full-time employment in radio, and worked for some years on a range of stations, producing both music and current affairs content. It was a turbulent political time in New Zealand, and I particularly enjoyed interviewing the politicians of the day from the Prime Minister down.

By the end of my time in radio, when the deregulation of the industry caused me to seek more stable employment so we could start a family, I had become a programme director, managing the team of broadcasters on the radio station for which I was then working.

### The Advocate

For some years before ACB Radio, my day job was Manager of Government Relations for the Royal New Zealand Foundation for the Blind, now simply known as the [Blind Foundation](#). In addition to that, I was the National President of [the Association of Blind Citizens of New Zealand](#). To draw an analogy that will be familiar to American readers, it's a little like being a senior manager in a state agency for the blind, while also being National President of ACB or [NFB](#).

These two roles sat well together when all was harmonious in New Zealand's blindness community, but could be a pretty potent combination when there was conflict between the consumer movement and the service provider. Sadly, there was plenty of conflict to come.

Since New Zealand's blind became organised in 1945, governance of the Foundation had been the cause of repeated political skirmishes between the blind and the service provider. One even led to a protest march, and acrimonious public exchanges played out in the media. It was my view that the matter should be settled once and for all by allowing blind people to democratically elect the board of the agency. A Task Force was formed to develop a new constitution for the organisation based on principles of self-determination. It met with intransigence from the discredited status quo, determined to defend the agency against "blind radicalism".

Technology helped me to be influenced in my views about blindness philosophy and blindness-related services by some of the leading international thinkers of the time. I had been online since

1986. I spent more money than I should have accessing the now long-defunct [CompuServe Information Service](#), and accessing dial-up bulletin boards. These included "Blink Link" operated by the late Willie Wilson in Pittsburgh, and latterly the BBS (bulletin board system) run by [the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind](#).

My first modem, a LightSpeed 1200, was able to connect at 300 baud, and even at the then amazingly fast speed of 1200 baud. In 1988, that doubled to 2400 baud when I invested in my next modem, A Netcom.

Having a dial-up modem not only connected me with early adopters who were blind, but also with information about blindness organisations. It was thanks to being online that I first came across literature from the National Federation of the Blind. The positive message about blindness, and learning about other blind people who were doing the kind of things I wanted to do, filled me with hope during a time of teenage introspection and self-doubt, when I wondered what sort of future was possible.

I applied for, and received, a grant from a fund that fosters potential blind leaders in New Zealand, so I could attend the 1995 NFB National Convention in Chicago.

I attended again in 1997 in New Orleans. In 1998, by now as the National President of our consumer organisation, I visited Baltimore to pay my respects at Kenneth Jernigan's funeral.

Since I was in the area, I paid a visit to the ACB National Office in DC, and was struck by what a warm, friendly reception I received. They even ordered in pizza.

The first truly effective online-based advocacy campaign I saw was when Jamal Mazrui sought to gain support for reforming the NFB, in 1990 and 1991. You can still [read that material here](#). Jamal's advocacy inspired me. He was one of the first people to fully grasp the power of online activism, long before social media and the mainstream availability of the Internet. I think that's the key to harnessing technology for social change. You have an ability to see a technology as it is now, think of innovative ways to use it that may be considered unorthodox at the time, and clearly understand where the technology is likely to go.

So with all this background knowledge of NFB, it wasn't surprising that when funding became available to invite an international speaker to one of the conferences of the Association of Blind Citizens here in New Zealand, as the Association's President I was keen to ask NFB President Marc Maurer if he'd like to pay a visit.

It didn't happen, due to bad timing. Our conference was in early October 1998. Kenneth Jernigan was gravely ill, and in fact died a few days later. In 1999, the timing wasn't good for Marc either, and with money to spend, we decided to look for alternative speakers.

### [The Geek](#)

Although I had been online since 1986, my interest in, and use of technology goes back even further. In the early 80s, our high school was given access to an Apple IIe computer, along with a VersaBraille from Telesensory. One of the first note taking devices, the VersaBraille stored data on a standard cassette tape. Asking it to load a document would result in all sorts of magical clunks, shakes, shudders and whirring sounds, until, eventually, you got your article, if you were lucky and the cassette was still in good shape. Using various software options known as overlays, you could extend the VersaBraille's functions. One of those overlays allowed the VersaBraille and the Apple IIe to talk to each other. After loading the overlay on the VersaBraille, and entering a couple of cryptic commands on the computer, you could input text in Braille, and read the Apple's screen in Braille.

This required that appropriate software be installed on the Apple side of course. Braille Edit, and later BEX (Braille Edit Express) from Raised Dot Computing, were the premier word processing packages of the day for blind people.

I can't explain why, but I just had a natural aptitude for using these things. I took to it with very little formal instruction. It enthralled me, and I would read all the documentation I could, while also keenly subscribing to all the cassette publications I could. Raised Dot Computing did a great newsletter back then, and when a new issue of it arrived, it was like Christmas.

Our national library for the blind here in New Zealand subscribed to Doug Wakefield's audio publication, News Bits. I loved the production values Doug maintained. It could have been a radio programme produced for airing on public radio. His Braille reading skills inspired me as a teenager to keep practicing reading out-loud for radio. He was exceptionally fluent.

I got to hear through News Bits about the changing world of computers, how the PC was becoming dominant, and about companies like Henter-Joyce, Artic Technologies, a promising screen reader called Flipper, and many other companies long gone. When I eventually devised Main Menu for ACB Radio, News Bits set the standard I was trying to reach.

My knowledge of the technology, and perhaps more importantly my ability to communicate that knowledge, saw me helping out other kids and even the teachers. This meant that I could often get away with skipping a PE period, so I could help others with the technology while not having my education suffer. At the time, I thought that was pretty cool.

I used technology as a tool to help me at University and in my radio work, and did a lot of beta testing for the New Zealand company Pulse Data International, which manufactured the Keynote devices that later became BrailleNote.

So it was only natural that once I got online, I would often participate in technology discussions, both asking and answering questions. At one point, I set up my own BBS in New Zealand, the OUT OF SIGHT BBS, which carried many [FidoNet](#) echoes.

I had received funding for technology that helped me in my radio career. When in music radio, whoever was my Programme Director would print out my playlist using a PortaTheil Braille Embosser, with the help of an intriguing little box called the Ransley Braille translator. This was hardware with built-in Braille translation, that sat between the PC and the embosser. It meant that someone who knew nothing about Braille could produce Braille without any effort.

Having given up commercial radio for the stability of a lobbying job in the capital, I was still fascinated by the advances in technology, particularly by the increasing viability of hearing audio via the computer. It was clear to me from the mid-1990s that unless there was a viable way for blind people to move to Windows, many jobs that had recently opened up for us would close off again. It seems hard to believe now, but there was a time when people wondered whether we would ever get a truly workable Windows screen reader.

I was playing with Windows as early as I could, calling the US to download software such as Slimware Window Bridge over a 9600 baud modem. Yes, modems were continuing to get faster. Willie Wilson's Blink Link bulletin board now boasted that it was "striding along at 9600 baud".

But it wasn't until I picked up a demo of JAWS for Windows 1.1 at an NFB convention that I knew we were going to be OK. After purchasing JAWS, I started transitioning away from DOS and spending a lot more time with Windows.

RealAudio had arrived on the scene, and I can still remember the thrill of being able to hear a newscast from [National Public Radio](#), all the way from the USA, over my computer. The quality was poor, and there was break-up even over my super-fast 56K modem, but it seemed like a miracle.

The first software I used that allowed me to speak in real-time with people from around the world via the computer was [VocalTec Internet phone](#), which I downloaded sometime in 1995. These days, when we fire up a tool like [Skype](#), typically we add people we know, either in person or through social networks. VocalTec Internet Phone was more like ham radio. You put yourself online, and you just called people at random for the thrill of speaking to someone. The first time I ran the software, I connected with an English speaker in Russia. This was only a few years after the end of the cold war, so talking to someone who was recently behind the iron curtain was just incredible to me. Given that we both were only using 56K modems, the quality was surprisingly good.

In 1996, I realised that this fusion of Internet and audio technology was particularly attractive to blind people, many of whom love their broadcast radio, and their ham radio.

I decided to set up a website, which was kind of a blog before anyone had coined that phrase, called the Arena. The Arena featured some of my own writing, and RealAudio versions of radio interviews I was doing in my government relations job. It also featured a frequently updated directory of radio stations streaming in RealAudio, or offering RealAudio on demand. At one point, that directory was fairly complete, but eventually it became impossible to maintain that completeness as the technology was more widely adopted.

One fun feature we had on The Arena was called "The Voice Behind the Keyboard". This was a place where we'd publish audio clips sent in by visitors to the site. It was all about the novelty of hearing the voices of people you may have corresponded with on email lists, but never met.

In 1998, in response to a bulging inbox full of questions about audio on the PC, I set up [the PC Audio list](#), which is still running to this day under different and highly capable management. It was, and is, a great way for people to share information about this fascinating area of computing.

The software we were using back then has largely been replaced, although some old favourites are still around, including [Sound Forge](#), [Goldwave](#), and [Winamp](#).

## Chapter Two: Something to Shout About

On new year's eve 1998, I was supposed to be writing [my Master of Public Policy Thesis](#), and my family had headed off on holiday to let me get on with it in solitude. But if you don't take a break, it all becomes a bit of a blur. On one of those breaks, I happened to look at a Winamp mailing list I was subscribed to, and learned about the release of a new technology called [SHOUTcast](#).

SHOUTcast was revolutionary, because it was a viable Internet streaming framework for the masses. The free source plug-in installed into the Winamp player many of us were using already. The free server was simple to configure, merely by editing a well-commented configuration file. You could run all aspects of the stream on one computer, or stream it easily to a server with more bandwidth. Of great benefit to screen reader users was that you could stream music directly from Winamp to a SHOUTcast server using Winamp's audio pipeline, meaning your sound card was still free for you to hear your screen reader without it going over the air. I knew right away that this was a game changer.

Within half an hour of having read about SHOUTcast, I had my first test stream online of the low power FM station I was running, which was already using Winamp as its means of playing music. I think it's fair to say that my break from writing my thesis was much longer than I had anticipated.

The only trouble was that I didn't have a broadband connection. My dial-up connection meant I could only have a couple of listeners tuned in at a time, and that was if the bit rate was low enough. Certainly a stereo stream wasn't an option.

I then came up with the idea of establishing the Hear Today Network, HTN. The idea was that a group of blind people would get together to start a radio station on the Internet, where listeners could interact via email and instant messaging software. Rather than a bunch of people just doing their own thing, the station would be united by common jingles, promo messages and a vision for what the station should sound like.

I put a concept recording together, and started taking it around providers of bandwidth here in New Zealand, hoping we'd get someone to sponsor the project. Storage and bandwidth have become magnitudes cheaper in 15 years. In those days, finding a company that would take something like this on was a big undertaking, and I was unsuccessful.

We were able to do some test broadcasts under the Hear Today brand thanks to Mark Senq, a blind IT enthusiast. He had access to some bandwidth and let us use it during some weekends. The response to those broadcasts showed me that my hunch was correct, there was a real interest in the concept of blind people having a station of their own.

The world was riding the dot-com bubble. Many start-ups were experimenting with the Internet, both in terms of the application of the technology, and exploring the kinds of business models that might work in this new digital age.

In July 1999, [Live365](#) was launched. When it began, Live365 was a free means of obtaining a SHOUTcast server. Streams were listed in Nullsoft's SHOUTcast directory.

This resolved the issue of bandwidth, but I concluded, wrongly as history now shows, that if everyone could pick up a SHOUTcast server and do their own thing, they'd probably not want to be locked into a collective project.

I abandoned the Hear Today project, and concentrated instead on developing an Internet version of my own station, MBSFM. MBS stood for the Mosen Broadcasting System, and the FM was because we were running MBSFM on low power FM in Wellington, New Zealand's capital.

MBSFM experimented with a number of formats including all 70s, and all old time radio.

### Blind Line Begins

With MBSFM up and running, I quickly formalised some of the Hear Today broadcasts I had been doing, and started the first international talk show exclusively for blind people. I had been listening for a while to a show called HandyTalk, a general disability talk show hosted by Michael Lauf, and I felt there was a need for a show that was exclusively blindness focussed.

When you tuned into talk radio on terrestrial radio back then, the show might have been discussing local issues that were of significance to one's community. Nationally syndicated shows were likely to favour a particular political perspective. In a sense, that's a community too, a community of belief. Blindness doesn't unite us in areas such as political belief or religious affiliation. Yet there are some common issues that do unite us, such as discrimination, unemployment or underemployment, accessibility, and just doing things in a non-visual way. In that sense, I believe we are a community of sorts. For the first time, the Internet could bring us together globally so we could share experiences and tips. We already had email lists, but there's something more personal about hearing the voices of contributors. Thus, Blind Line was born.

The very first guest on Blind Line was Doug Geoffray of [GW Micro](#), followed the next week by Ted Henter of Henter-Joyce. In a series of interviews that continued on ACB Radio, I was able to talk with people I admired immensely, who had made a real difference through their work. My goal was to build a biographical picture of their lives, but also to just let them talk, to give the listener a real understanding of what drove them and what they had accomplished.

I didn't have the technology at that time to interview someone live and take questions from callers, so the interviews were pre-recorded. Actually, I didn't even have a mixer. I would use a basic phone patch device that would plug into a double-adaptor in the phone jack, and then into the microphone socket of my sound card. That made it necessary for me to use the telephone to talk into. I remember going to great lengths to select just the right phone with the best mouthpiece. It was anything but state of the art.

Blind Line would also feature a section where callers would phone in to talk about the interview they just heard, or anything else that was on their minds. And to my delight, phone in they did, even though they had to call a New Zealand number to be on the show. We'd use that same phone patch, meaning when we got a call, you could hear the phone ring.

In some ways, I think it was the rough and ready sound, the occasional break-up of audio, the computer crashes, that gave it a raw, pioneering feel that many people liked at the time. Internet broadcasting was so new, and we were doing something that hadn't been done before.

### First Contact

Word of Blind Line spread rapidly, and it became enormously popular in a very short time. Then one day I received an email from Chris Gray, who was on the Board of the American Council of the Blind. Chris told me that ACB was considering establishing an Internet radio station. Would I, he asked, be a consultant to them and talk them through what was involved? I told him I'd be very happy to help in any way I could.

By this stage, I had heard ACB online already, because ACB's first streamed convention predates ACB Radio and me. ACB's 1999 convention was streamed. Results were somewhat mixed, but the fact that it was attempted at all, at a time when pulling off something like that was much harder than it would be in subsequent years, shows the culture of innovation that was pulsing through ACB at the time. They had a group of people, including President Paul Edwards, First Vice President Brian Charlson, and Board member Chris Gray, who were tech savvy and knew that the Internet was a means of extending ACB's reach.

Charlie Crawford had recently come on board as ACB's Executive Director following the retirement of Oral Miller. Charlie was a progressive thinker, a popular MCB Commissioner, and also understood the power of online technology. As mentioned earlier, MCB had been running its own BBS.

Earlene Hughes, who was managing ACB's web presence, was also familiar with and interested in streaming. She ran a website on which she maintained a great collection of audio links.

Having heard snippets of that ACB convention live stream, I was impressed by Paul Edwards and was delighted to invite him to New Zealand to be our international speaker.

When Paul arrived in New Zealand, I had absolutely no idea what would come next.

### Chapter Three: "Why Don't You Manage ACB Radio for us?"

The difficult times make you value the good times even more. And when Paul Edwards landed in New Zealand, the blind community, and therefore I with a foot in both camps, were going through some difficult times.

There had been extensive consultation on the future governance of the agency, and a broad consensus existed within the community. We had a set of recommendations and a completed new Constitution. But the existing unpopular board was doing all it could to delay and hijack the process.

At an operational level, the organisation was being restructured, with some people losing their jobs.

All this came to a head at the 1999 conference of the Association of Blind Citizens which Paul attended, when we voted no confidence in the Chairman of the Foundation's Board, and issued a media release accordingly.

I'm not the first person, either in New Zealand or elsewhere, who has felt the pressure of being a consumer leader and a senior figure in a blindness agency at the same time. But I had reached the point where I hated my job, hated having to get up each morning, and displayed physical symptoms of stress on Sunday evenings when I was preparing to face another hellish week. I take being a provider for my family very seriously, but nothing is worth that.

It was a tense meeting with the Foundation's Chief Executive following the Association's no confidence resolution. She was meeting me in her capacity as my employer, and was asking for a commitment of loyalty I could not give in good conscience. I told her loyalty needed to be earned, not demanded, and that I had decided to resign. Despite requests for me to reconsider, I had reached the point where I realised my integrity was at stake if I stayed.

Fortunately for me, since my previous position had been disestablished as part of the restructuring, I was able to opt for voluntary redundancy, giving me a financial buffer until whatever came next.

I headed home to my then wife Amanda, pregnant with our third child, to tell her that what we had discussed and mutually agreed was indeed happening. I wasn't sure what would come next, but I felt sure that I would survive.

Paul Edwards had elected to stay on for a few days after the conference, and he had been staying with us. I was certainly not expecting what he said in response to my big news.

"I've been careful not to try and influence you while you made up your mind about what to do next," he said. "But now that you have, why don't you manage ACB Radio for us?"

I thought I would find another job, but I certainly didn't expect to be offered one within an hour of resigning from the last one.

I didn't say yes immediately though. I wanted to be sure that my vision for what a blindness Internet radio station would be like mirrored what ACB had in mind. Critical for me was editorial independence. If ACB were to run an Internet radio station, I wanted to be sure it would be run like [the BBC](#), or indeed our own public broadcaster, [Radio New Zealand](#). Under those models, the Government funds the organisation, but it does so mindful that it cannot exert any pressure on the nature of programming. While I would expect articles from ACB's publication, then known as the Braille Forum, and other informational material to be broadcast, I wanted to be sure current affairs would be covered objectively, with both sides of an issue being presented with equal opportunity to

have their say. If all I was being asked to do was to run a propaganda organ of ACB, or worse, of the ACB leadership, then the answer would be "thanks, but no thanks".

Paul gave me a good education on the principles at the core of ACB's very existence. I learned about the Board of Publications, and how ACB's publications were constitutionally at arms length from the president and board of the day, precisely to guard against interference with editorial independence. Paul assured me that he would welcome lively debate on blindness issues, and that open communication would foster better understanding.

Originally, the position was only part time, I believe for 10 hours a week. ACB didn't have a lot of money for the project, and this was another advantage to ACB of going offshore. The exchange rate between the new Zealand dollar and the US dollar was extremely favourable to both parties. It got to the point where 42 American cents bought one New Zealand dollar. So even though ACB Radio was offering a meagre salary, it was enough to be useful when combined with other consultancy work I was doing.

Another factor that played a big role in my decision to accept Paul's offer was Paul himself. From the moment we met, it was like we'd known each other forever. Our senses of humour are very similar. Like me, he is quick with a pun. We enjoy a lot of the same music and comedy, including Tom Lehrer and the Goon Show. He is a rare phenomenon, an American who knows about cricket. We found ourselves just talking about all kinds of things late into the night, having some pretty deep philosophical debates about blindness and advocacy. I like the man a lot.

I was sold, and thrilled that a job had come up that incorporated all the things I was interested in. I could use all I'd learned about streaming to set the station up. I could use my managerial skills to help the project grow, and my radio skills to encourage quality output and a high standard of investigative journalism. It really was my dream job.

I had to wait for Paul to talk to his Board, but in the mean time, I needed to make economies. Any necessary expenditure had to be cut immediately, and whether ACB Radio worked out or not, MBSFM couldn't continue as there were expenses associated with its operation.

What I didn't anticipate was that when I announced the closure of MBSFM due to changing personal circumstances, people were so concerned at its loss that donations started to pour in. Internet-based money transfer services were still in their infancy, so I had cheques in a range of currencies turning up in my mailbox. A particularly enthusiastic listener, Dan Roy, was out there encouraging donations, for which I remain humbled and grateful.

In less than a month, we got the green light to proceed with ACB Radio. It was time to break the news of the station's imminent arrival, and MBSFM's definite closure, to the blind community.

The Blind Line that went out on MBSFM on Sunday morning, 14 November 1999 was a big one. It featured Curtis Chong, President of the NFB in Computer Science, talking about NFB's decision to sue America Online over its inaccessibility, making the case that cyberspace was a public place, and therefore covered under the Americans with Disabilities Act.

We promised that Paul Edwards would be making a significant announcement, and he came on the programme to announce ACB Radio. In the statement, he said,

"The American Council of the Blind is extremely excited by the prospect of setting up Internet radio broadcasting, and are particularly excited by the fact that we've been able to persuade one of Internet broadcasting's leading proponents to take the lead

in helping us to set up the program. So on behalf of the American Council of the Blind, it gives me great pleasure to welcome as the new Managing Director, chief disc jockey, and chief engineer of ACB Radio, Mr Jonathan Mosen, formerly of MBSFM."

"What we're hoping ACB Radio will become is a single source that blind people can use to get all the information they want in easy-to-use audio format. We're hoping, by this time next year, we will have programming that's produced for ACB Radio that will fill a substantial number of hours per week."

Paul encouraged people to come forward, particularly blindness organisations in other countries, including blindness agencies, so ACB Radio could look at blindness issues from a global perspective.

Paul made a point of saying that it was ACB Radio's intention to have Blind Line continue to ask difficult and probing questions, even if those difficult and probing questions were asked of ACB people.

"Blind Line already has a reputation of being the leading program that explores in an intellectually honest and appropriate way, issues that relate to the blind people of the world, and it would be our intent to continue to let Blind Line do precisely that".

I thanked people for their generous donations to MBSFM, and assured them that cheques received would be destroyed and not cashed.

Reaction to the announcement of ACB Radio's arrival wasn't universally positive. While greeted with enthusiasm by some, others who weren't aligned with ACB, including some NFB members and people who listened from outside the US, were concerned about the direction the new station might take. All I could do was encourage them to give it a listen, and we would work hard to earn their confidence and trust.

Paul Edwards devoted his President's Message in the February 2000 issue of The Braille Forum to ACB Radio, introducing it to more of the membership. In it, he recounted his own recollections of how ACB Radio came to be.

"Several of us had read messages on the ACB list about an Internet radio station operated by a guy in New Zealand named Jonathan Mosen.

When we listened to the station we were struck by several things. First, the whole operation seemed immensely professional. There were jingles, station breaks, live programs, old-time radio, music and a general air of competence that led Chris Gray, Brian Charlson and me to approach the board last September for authority to look into what it would take to start a station of our own.

We agreed that, since there was no money in the budget, ACB Radio would start only if we could raise some money ourselves. Luckily for ACB, Florida met right after our board meeting and I was able to persuade that state to allocate \$3,000 to the venture. Chris and Brian also raised funds but I do not know how much or from where.

Our next task was to find somebody with the expertise to run such an operation, and that looked to be a very difficult task. Then, during my trip to New Zealand, I got to know this Jonathan Mosen person better -- partly because I stayed with him and his charming wife and two and a third children.

For reasons well beyond the scope of this article, Jonathan felt he needed to resign from the position he had held and presto, I was able to persuade him to run ACB Radio for us. He was an obvious choice since he had already done it with MBS-FM and, once I had cleared things with all the appropriate folks back in the states, we were ready to run.

My account makes it sound as though everything simply fell into place -- and to some extent that is true. Nevertheless, it is a tribute to Jonathan's stamina and ability that he was prepared to accept an on-air date of December first which -- by the time the final arrangements had been made -- was only three weeks away. The date was met and ACB Radio has grown from strength to strength ever since."

## Chapter Four: ACB Radio Begins

Much of November was spent doing all the things one needs to do when starting a major website. They took a lot longer then, because content management systems either weren't around at all, or weren't in common usage. The founding of ACB Radio well pre-dates the WordPress era. We quite quickly moved to producing the ACB Radio site in Microsoft Front Page, but that didn't roll out until we unveiled a new website to complement our multiple-stream format in April 2000.

So the domain name was registered, pages were coded by hand, and initial promotional messages and other station elements were recorded.

The stream for ACB Radio, yes, there was only one stream called ACB Radio at launch time, was hosted by Live365, which was still free. Broadband was a luxury not available to a large number of blind people, so we elected to stream ACB Radio at 16 kilobits per second, 11 kilohertz, Mono. This meant even someone on a fairly poor dial-up connection could hear it. The trade-off was that at such a low bit rate, the audio could hardly be considered high fidelity. In those days though, people were OK with that. They were listening for the content, because this was their station, talking about things that no one else was talking about.

We also set up two email lists, one for ACB Radio announcements, and the other for discussion between listeners and ACB Radio personalities and management. Initially, those lists were managed via eGroups and not on the ACB Radio domain, because the domain was shared hosted, not run on a virtual or dedicated server.

We'd set ourselves a target of 1 December to begin, and were able to meet that target. To reflect the international nature of what we wanted the project to be, ACB Radio adopted Co-ordinated Universal Time, also known as UTC or GMT, as our official time zone. This was typical of international broadcasters, such as radio stations many were then used to hearing on shortwave. It's worth noting at this point that one potential name for the station was Global Blind Radio, GBR. But it was only right that if ACB was stumping up the cash, it should get the recognition for doing that through the station's name.

On Wednesday, 1 December 1999, everything was ready to go. The work had been done, and it was just a matter of waiting until 1 PM New Zealand time, 0 UTC, to launch it.

My friend Gary Adler, an ex-pat new Zealander who has lived in Melbourne Australia for many years, happened to be visiting Wellington that day. He dropped by, and we headed out to a local fish and chip shop to sample their \$5 special. I made sure we got back, bellies full of lunch, at about 12:50, all ready to push the button at 1 PM.

The launch of ACB Radio was very much a soft launch. All of us involved in the station knew that a lot of evolution needed to take place. But for that to happen, for fresh ACB Radio-specific content and material from other sources to come in, we had to be out there, stream active, cultivating interest and an audience.

So we didn't make a production of our launch. At exactly 0 UTC on 1 December, from a spare bedroom in our home in Wellington that I used as an office, we began with an episode of "The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes", and we were up and running.

ACB issued the following media release on launch day.

For Immediate Release

### World Blind Community Linked by Internet Radio

Today, the American Council of the Blind, announced the launch of ACB-Radio, a web-based radio station which will reach any visually-impaired computer-user in the English-speaking world. ACB-radio will be an accessible source for relevant news and entertainment, as well as educational programming, policy analysis, and dissemination of information of particular importance to people who are visually impaired.

Jonathan Mosen of New Zealand who manages the station explains how to find the station on the internet: "just point your browser to [www.acb.org](http://www.acb.org) and click on ACB on the radio, and you are there!"

Paul Edwards of Miami, ACB President said "This is not just a first for the blindness community, its our place in our time to celebrate who we are!" Radio has always been a boon for blind people. It informs and entertains without the need for video. ACB Radio now offers even a more concentrated programming stream aimed to meet the needs of the blind wherever they may live.

ACB Executive Director Charles Crawford of Washington DC, observed, "We now have it within our power to instantly inform ourselves and to build a better world for all blind people."

Although the station is still in its infancy, spokespersons for the American Council of the Blind indicate that ACB-radio expects to carry a variety of programs produced by blind people themselves. "Imagine," says Chris Gray, who brought the initiative to ACB's Board of Directors, "A parent who has sent his child to a residential school for the blind, hundreds of miles from home, being able to hear his or her child, carried live on the net, performing in a show or participating in a debate! The possibilities for bringing people closer together are endless!"

The service expects to grow in popularity and content as more and more blind people log on to the [WWW.ACB.org](http://WWW.ACB.org) web site and tune in. For now, the internet has already proved its usefulness and as the net grows, so will ACB Radio and the community it serves.

To learn more about ACB-Radio, call the national office of the American Council of the Blind at: 202/467-5081 or between the hours of 2 and 5 PM eastern time, 800/424-8666.

## Chapter Five: Down to Work

One of the tasks that took up a lot of my time after launch was being an ACB Radio missionary. Clearly, there were plenty of people who had the potential to bring skills and programming to the station. My aim was to build the best team around and enthuse people about what we could all achieve together. ACB Radio, if it was to succeed, couldn't afford to be MBSFM under a new name. We had to entice, persuade, cajole, recruit, and welcome the very best talent the blind community had to offer, ensuring the talent was harnessed in the best possible way.

To that end, we immediately made plans for me to present a workshop on Sound Forge at the 2000 convention in Louisville. We would select people who showed an interest in putting talk programming together but didn't know how. We'd even give them a copy of Sound Forge, in exchange for a commitment to getting us material we could use.

One thing that surprised me as I researched putting ACB Radio on the air was that there was at that time no truly accessible, PC-based scheduling system that would allow us to put a reliable schedule of content together. We would have some live content, such as Blind Line, and that was easy to air at an advertised time. But when it came to pre-recorded content, it was shuffled, unless I made a point of being there to force something to play at a specific time, which I sometimes did.

Early ACB Radio programming consisted of old-time radio content, items from the Braille Forum, Laura Oftedah's well-produced and popular ACB Reports, Blind Line, some live music programming, and other material.

Jim Snowbarger was there right from the beginning, with his [Snowman Radio Broadcast](#) which had already been running for some time. It still enjoys a cult following even now, many years after it stopped being produced.

But Jim's most enduring ACB Radio legacy is the iconic jingles he produced. We had no budget to pay him for them, and they certainly deserved to be paid for. They were used across the ACB Radio streams once we moved to a multi-stream format, and variations of them were produced by others over the years.

Dan Kysor, who had been producing a recorded talk show in RealAudio format prior to ACB Radio's arrival, did some episodes for us.

From the beginning, Marlaina Leiberg was a keen supporter of ACB Radio. With a project like this, you often get people who say, "yes, when I get around to it, I'd like to do a show". Some people did get around to it, some never did. Marlaina embraced ACB Radio with great gusto, and was passionate about it. She and her husband Gary invested a lot of their own money in equipment that allowed her to produce programming of a very high technical standard. And her natural, outgoing communication style made her an instant hit with listeners.

Her first show for ACB Radio was called Blind Spot, which started life as a pre-recorded interview show. It promised an emphasis on "low tech, no tech". When Marlaina would send me the files to put on the air, she would use the prefix "BS", which always used to give me a giggle.

Blind Line continued, and by this stage had been enhanced by some new software, BuddyPhone. I'm sad to see that this little piece of software doesn't have its own Wikipedia entry, because for its time it did a great job, despite it gaining the nickname "BuggyPhone" within ACB Radio. The significance of BuddyPhone is that it ensured more people could participate. We were keen to ensure that being

able to express your view on Blind Line wasn't dependent on whether you had the money to call New Zealand. BuddyPhone meant that anyone with a computer, which you had if you were listening to ACB Radio, and a microphone headset, could do just that.

### Happy Y2K

By the end of our first month on air, we were ready to be a bit daring. The arrival of 2000 was the cause of global celebrations and global nervousness. The celebrations are obvious. The tension was because no one was sure how bad the impact of the Y2K bug, caused by developers saving space and not coding for a four digit year, might be. ACB Radio decided to cover the transition to 2000 in style, by airing live shows hosted by people from around the world. I wanted my children, who at that point numbered two, to be able to say they were there in the nation's capital for the celebrations. So we set up the phone patch, put on a nice long old-time radio show, set the line recording plug-in to fire next in the playlist, and headed off to the celebrations. In those days, it wasn't possible to hear ACB Radio on a cell phone, so we had no way of telling when the link kicked in, or indeed if it ever did. Later, listeners told us that it did indeed work, except that just after midnight, the phone networks got congested with happy new year greetings, the call disconnected, and listeners were treated to some silence until we could get back home to start the next program.

Other broadcasters took the stream from around the world. Some of them had had experience with streaming before, others I had had to teach. But again, even though some of it was very rough, the fact that it was being attempted and the technology made it unpredictable was all part of the fun in those pioneering days.

## Chapter Six: It's Getting Better

In early 2000, awareness of ACB Radio was spreading rapidly. People loved the concept, and were eager to learn how to participate. And just at the right time, Live365 handed us a gift.

Live365 was evolving from a mere provider of SHOUTcast services, becoming a provider of value-added services that set it apart from a SHOUTcast server you could set up yourself or find elsewhere. As part of this attempt to differentiate itself, it released a new tool called EasyCast. EasyCast allowed broadcasters to upload content and stream it from the Live365 server, meaning it wasn't necessary to have a computer connected to the server when streaming pre-recorded content.

The most significant breakthrough this represented for us was that we finally had the answer to our scheduling issues. We could upload a set of fresh content every day, put it together in a playlist, and tell listeners exactly when it would air.

But I realised that it offered the chance for ACB Radio to revamp its services radically. With Live365 offering its servers for free, cost wasn't a factor.

So I sat down to think about the logical categories into which the content we aired, or wanted to air, could be divided.

I came up with four key areas. The first was talk programming, largely but not exclusively related to blindness.

The second was the old-time radio content, which was popular with a wide audience that extended beyond our target market.

The third was an area I wanted to develop, a stream showcasing the music of well-known and up-and-coming blind musicians.

The final area was to revisit the old concept of the Hear Today Network, and put together a stream of blind broadcasters from around the globe doing music radio. I knew that this latter stream was going to be a labour-intensive exercise, so set it to one side pending setting up the other three streams and ensuring they were well-established.

I put the idea to Paul Edwards, who was excited by the prospect. From ACB's point of view, the proposed changes weren't going to come without a cost. There was no way I could manage such an expanded radio service to a satisfactory standard without expanding the hours I gave to ACB Radio. They agreed to this, and I began work on the new services.

The first question was, what should we call them? Through the ACB Radio Friends list, we had a lively brainstorming session.

The Cafe required us to advertise extensively for people to send us their material. Most of it was sent on physical media, so it was necessary for me to digitise it. Half of the material had announcements at the beginning of the file, the other half had announcements at the end, in the hope that when it was all put on shuffle, it would sound fairly natural.

We used music from artists who you'd expect, such as Ray Charles, Stevie Wonder, Ronnie Milsap and others. But it was incredible to receive so much material from so many talented people, some of whom had produced some top-sounding stuff in home studios.

Treasure-Trove was ACB Radio's most popular stream by a long way during the time I was there. We knew that it attracted a lot of sighted listeners, so when ACB public service announcements were produced, we were always careful to ensure they were run on Treasure-Trove on a regular basis. We'd also promote shows from the other streams in an effort to attract listeners to them.

I would frequently get emails from people who said they would put the stream on for an elderly relative, and how much it was appreciated. It is true that OTR streams are common, more so now than then, but at the time, the stream cost nothing other than time to maintain, and it was popular.

The original ACB Radio Stream, launched on 1 December 1999, became ACB Radio mainstream. I chose this name very deliberately. It has two meanings. Blind people want to be part of the mainstream. We seek the opportunity to hold down jobs, participate in our communities, raise a family, and have our rights respected. But I also named that particular stream Mainstream because it was always important to remember the fundamental reason for ACB Radio's establishment. I'm enough of a student of politics and economics to know that capitalism is all about cycles of boom and bust. ACB Radio was able to take advantage of the abundance of free resources being made available as a result of an extraordinary age of experimentation and investment in Internet start-ups. It wasn't going to last forever. If a time came that ACB Radio needed to scale back, I wanted to give Mainstream a name that made it unlikely that that stream would suffer.

Mainstream was about blindness issues, challenging current affairs, advocacy, and lifestyle programming. In other words, it was the stream that best reflected ACB's own values and reason for being.

With decisions taken to expand significantly, we set about informing and educating the listeners about the change, which was to happen on 10 April 2000. We put a series of promotional messages together for the single ACB Radio stream, using The Beatles "Getting Better" as the theme. Each message outlined the purpose of one of the new streams, and why people might want to listen.

The new streams, Mainstream, The Cafe and Treasure-Trove, launched as scheduled on 10 April, without a hitch.

In just four months, ACB Radio had grown from a small stream shuffling a range of pre-recorded content with a bit of live programming, to a network of concurrent streams offering a wide range of options.

### [Turn On, Tune In](#)

With more streams available, I put them all in an m3u playlist, which we called the ACB Radio Tuner. This allowed people to use the playlist navigation controls in their media player of choice to skip back and forth between the streams.

Later, some of the gifted software developers on the team took this concept to the next level, making the ACB Radio Tuner a stand-alone application offering a range of useful features, all accessible with hotkeys. That was significant, because there were blind people who had access to a computer, perhaps owned by a family member, but who didn't have a screen reader. With the Tuner, a blind person could channel surf the streams without sighted assistance even if there were no screen reader installed.

## Chapter Seven: Main Menu

ACB Radio mainstream was committed to producing two hours of fresh content every week day. The programming would change at 0 UTC, and cycle over a 24-hour period, so everyone had a chance to hear it. Content was also made available on demand. People were downloading ACB Radio content long before the podcast era.

So the challenge was on to find great talk programming produced by blind people, or about blindness issues, for ACB Radio mainstream.

It had been my view for some time that Blind Line was getting a little too dominated by technology subjects. There's no doubt there was a need for the fast-moving world of technology to be covered, but mindful that ACB is an advocacy organisation, I wanted to move Blind Line further towards current events. It was clear that technology warranted its own show.

So I talked with listeners via the Friends List about what an ideal technology show might sound like. We were keen to encourage involvement in ACB Radio, and technology enthusiasts were likely to either possess, or easily acquire, the skills to submit content. Many of the calls we were getting into Blind Line at that stage were from some tech-savvy people, so I decided we'd try producing a two-hour show every week full of grassroots technology demonstrations and reviews, coupled with the occasional interview from me.

Since there were no podcasts or social networks, it wasn't easy for people to find ways of producing a demonstration, then getting it circulated widely to those who wanted to hear it. Main Menu provided that platform.

I called the show Main Menu because I had quite a few technology products at one time or another that offered a main menu. It also fitted nicely with the fact that the show was being broadcast on ACB Radio Mainstream.

Here's my message to the ACB Radio lists, announcing the first ever Main Menu and what it would contain.

At 1 hour GMT on Monday, that's 9 PM Eastern time on Sunday in the US, 1 PM New Zealand time and 11 AM Eastern Australian time, ACB Radio turns on its new web site and its three concurrent streams.

Debuting at this time on ACB Radio Mainstream is Main menu, a weekly 2 hour technology show. This show will also be repeated on ACB Radio Mainstream until 1 GMT the next day, allowing all of our international audience to hear it at a reasonable hour.

On the programme this week, what will the Microsoft verdict mean for blind people? We're joined by a panel of experts to discuss the verdict, the potential remedies, and what it all means for us.

Kurzweil 1000 5.0 has been released. We feature an interview with Stephen Baum who tells us all about the many new features he's added to the product, plus we give you a full demonstration of Realspeak, the new synthesiser bundled with Kurzweil 1000 that has everyone talking.

Enablelink.com is a new web community for the blind that has recently launched. We discuss this new site with its editor.

We'll have a review of the Logitech cordless keyboard, a look at a talking microwave, and some information about blind people using Linux.

To hear Main Menu, visit <http://www.acbradio.org>. When the new site opens, you'll find a link to ACB Radio mainstream. Choose that link and then choose to listen with Winamp or Realplayer 7, and you can hear the programme live or replayed for 24 hours. The programme will also be available a few hours after broadcast in our On Demand section.

This is a new show so we would appreciate people passing this information onto those who may be interested. It's Main Menu, your source for assistive technology news on the web.

Many generous people invested a lot of time and skill in putting contributions together for Main Menu in the over three years I ran it. It's always dangerous to single people out, but some regular contributors come to mind.

Matt Campbell, who was to play a pivotal role in ACB Radio, was involved right from the beginning with his looks at Linux.

Another key player on the technical side, Marc Mulcahy, produced a series on the Gnome Desktop.

Kelly Sapergia would regularly send in contributions on a range of topics, and they were always well produced.

Don Coco, known as DJC, was a prolific Main Menu contributor. His pieces would always start with what became his Main Menu signature tune, Percolator Twist by Billy Joe and the Checkmates. Don would always promise "news and views, you can use".

John Olivera produced a few great series, including one on Quicken.

Sometimes we would produce reviews, at other times, Main Menu segments were tutorials, sometimes divided into multiple episodes that ran for some weeks. I still get told by people that they learned some critical function of their computer thanks to a Main Menu tutorial. Later, when ACB Radio Interactive launched, we produced a free series on Internet broadcasting to encourage participation.

Michael Lang from Germany reviewed many pieces of audio equipment, including early MP3 players.

Jim Snowbarger produced a top-quality series of tutorials on writing JAWS scripts, and Carlos Taylor went into similar depth on the subject of Window-eyes set files.

Some of the contributions we received for Main Menu could be slotted in and played as they were, others required a lot of massaging, editing, and post-production with techniques such as noise reduction.

I would often interview key players in the industry about major developments, such as a new release of JAWS, Window-eyes, software for the Braille Lite or BrailleNote.

We'd also cover major upheavals in the industry. Main Menu was just a few episodes old when the merger of Henter-Joyce, Arkenstone, and Blazie Engineering was announced to create [Freedom Scientific](#).

Not only did we cover the merger as it happened, we also covered the fall-out, as internal debate spilled into the public arena by way of leaks.

When Main Menu started, we had to earn a reputation. Just as we did with political coverage, we tried hard to offer accuracy and balance. Reviews would never try to sell a product, but would attempt to highlight both good and bad points. After joining the assistive technology industry, I heard from companies who told me how much they anticipated, and to some extent dreaded, a Main Menu review. They knew it would be fair and thorough, and that's a great tribute.

In a three hour special, we even took on one of the most controversial assistive technology challenges of our time, JAWS versus Window-eyes, and didn't incur any criticism as we were careful to be accurate about everything we did.

We eventually went from having to ask for products to review, to being approached by companies who had a new product or an update that they wanted us to review.

Ultimately, Main Menu was picked up by a range of audio information services, including Voice Print in Canada. For those purposes, we set up a special folder on our FTP site, offering broadcast-quality versions of the files for download.

Being able to produce two hours of fresh, unique content every week is an achievement of which I'm very proud. The only times I can remember using content that was available elsewhere was when we were allowed to borrow a couple of articles from Brian Hartgen's Infotech, Dean Martineau's Sound Computing, and similar magazines, and when radio information services would give us access to interviews they'd aired with key people in the sector. Such events were very rare.

Those Main Menu episodes are a shining example of why ACB Radio was founded. Everyday consumers submitting content from all around the world, sharing their expertise and learning from each other, while maintaining standards of journalistic excellence. When you go through the archives of those episodes, it's a great historical account of the technology we were all using and the things that were on our minds during that period. I look through those 145 episodes I hosted and produced sometimes, and smile at how far the technology has advanced.

## Chapter Eight: Moving Out, and Moving Up

Just as ACB doubled down on ACB Radio in a financial sense, my family and I went all-in. We moved out of our home in Wellington, which being the capital city came with a sizeable mortgage. We chose to relocate to a small city, Whanganui, about 2.5 hours' drive north of Wellington. We had holidayed in Whanganui at the beginning of 2000, liked the place, and decided to make a move. Property was cheaper, and it was a great lifestyle.

We were able to purchase a house which came with a separate building, which we set about turning into my studio for ACB Radio.

I had recently completed a Sound Forge tutorial, "Forging Ahead". All the inquiries in my email had helped me to realise there was a market for this, and my work for ACB Radio simply made that point even clearer.

When the tutorial was complete, I was delighted that Freedom Scientific purchased the rights to it, subject to one requested modification. "Please," they said, "we do not want to encourage keyboard abuse. Don't talk about "hitting" the Enter key, we want people to press the Enter key." From that day to this, I've never talked about hitting a key in anything I've recorded.

With the favourable exchange rate at the time, I was able to use the funds to modify the studio building, and to buy equipment for the new studio. My then father-in-law built a new room in the studio, lined with acoustical foam. A custom-built desk, which was long, curved, and spanned a good part of the studio, was built in. Special outlets were built, so cables could run from the control room to the broadcast studio. This meant I could keep two computers, one for production and on-air work, the other for streaming, in the control room. Your average desktop computer was noisy back then, so this set-up ensured the on-air studio was very quiet.

The second computer, used predominantly for streaming purposes, was also used to run another version of MBSFM which served the Whanganui area on 88.5 FM, and also ended up carrying quite a bit of ACB Radio content.

For the studio, I purchased an Axel Digital broadcast console and a great set of studio monitors. The console featured two telephone hybrids. I still use that console, and the AKG microphone I bought at that time for my radio and recording work now.

The Whanganui studio was a dream come true, and a huge leap up from the spare bedroom from which I ran ACB Radio during its initial months. With great equipment and a studio built to my exact specifications, I couldn't have wanted anything more.

## Chapter Nine: Blind Line, Mainstream Style

In the over three years that I managed ACB Radio Mainstream, we aired a wide variety of programming. Blind Line continued all through my tenure, and we often covered the contentious issues of the day, ranging from NFB's collaboration with the motion picture industry to challenge the mandated audio description rules, to the GDUI complaint made on behalf of a guide dog handler about the Iowa Department for the Blind that was to cause so much internal friction within ACB.

We would also regularly hold ACB officials to account via the program, and feature candidates' debates before elections.

But it wasn't all serious. Santa would often appear just before Christmas, sounding suspiciously like Paul Edwards.

We'd run the occasional trivia contest, which was always a popular feature.

And we would feature biographical interviews with people who were prominent in one way or another.

One of our most popular shows was on the difficulty blind people had sleeping, and recent research being conducted into the issue.

But there's no question about what was the most popular Blind Line show of all. In early 2001, I received an email from Ronnie Milsap. I don't recall why he wrote, perhaps it was just to pass on his encouragement. I wrote back to him in thanks, and cheekily said to him that if he ever felt like appearing on Blind Line, I'd love to do the interview and there'd be many people who would enjoy the privilege of speaking with him. All my contact details in those days, including my work phone number, were in my signature.

One Sunday afternoon a few weeks later, I was sitting in my office when the phone rang. "Hi Jonathan," the voice said, "This is Ronnie Milsap". We had a pleasant chat, and agreed on a time he would be available to do Blind Line.

When the call was over, Amanda said, "who was that on the phone?" I replied that it was Ronnie Milsap, at which she scoffed, "yeah right, and I'm the queen of England". Hmmm, I wonder if Elizabeth realises she's been deposed?

Ronnie is such a generous, kind person. He was a joy to interview, the listener count was through the roof, and we put as many calls to air as we could.

He was also kind enough to pre-record a special message for ACB's 40th anniversary convention later that year at which ACB Radio provided the entertainment.

Blind Line had benefited from a significant technical upgrade in April 2000 when we launched ACB Radio mainstream. Prior to that time the interview component of Blind Line had been pre-recorded. We would play the interview, then callers had an opportunity to respond to it in a call-in section after the interview. My goal was to do the interviews live so callers could participate in asking questions of the guest.

I was after a kind of virtual switchboard where callers could phone in, hear the program on hold, and then be put to air when it was their time to talk. Such services are widely available now, but were less so back in 2000.

After some searching and testing of a number of services for appropriate functionality and accessibility, I finally found one called [Spiderphone](#) that met all my objectives. But it wasn't free, and at that time there was no budget.

I wrote a pitch to Spiderphone selling the objectives of ACB Radio. I was delighted when they agreed to sponsor Blind Line by donating their services.

Callers were then able to participate by dialling a New York number and entering an 8-digit code. Since it was a conferencing system, it also allowed for us to put multiple guests to air, a great thing when we were having a debate or seeking to get both perspectives on a contentious issue.

It worked well for the most part. The only glitches tended to occur as a result of problems getting a two-hour call from New Zealand to New York on the air cost-effectively. Some of the VOIP systems we tried were a little flaky. Fortunately, I finally obtained sponsorship for the phone call as well, allowing us to use the telephone hybrid.

Spiderphone resulted in an amusing little exchange between Marlaina Leiberg and me. Marlaina asked me during a conversation if I was a smoker. I've never smoked anything in my life, and I was curious about why she would ask me that. She replied that during Blind Line shows it sounded like I was using a cigarette lighter to light up. I was totally perplexed by this until I realised what she was hearing. Spiderphone allowed me to see incoming calls and put them to air using an accessible web page which I would have open in Internet Explorer. The page would refresh every time a new call came in. When a page loaded in that version of IE it would make a distinctive click. Because of the very low bit rate at which we were streaming, the artefacts really did make that click sound like someone using a cigarette lighter. From then on I was careful to turn that loading sound off before the show.

## Chapter Ten: Mainstream Musings

Spiderphone's generous support allowed other talk shows to make it onto Mainstream. Marlaina used it for a while when she took Blind Spot live before getting her own equipment up and running, and Dennis Miller began a new talk show called Miller Time.

We were right to get on the air with ACB Radio as soon as possible, because certainly in our case, the adage "If you build it they will come" applied. Particularly after we launched Mainstream we began getting a steady number of offers from competent providers of talk-based material.

I'm sure I have missed out some great shows that have slipped my mind with the passing of the years, but here are a few Mainstream highlights during my time that spring to mind.

Main Menu wasn't the only technology show that ran on Mainstream. Brian Hartgen from the UK began listening to Blind Line in the MBSFM days, and produced a great show called Infotech for ACB Radio mainstream. I was immediately impressed with Brian's thorough presentation style and fair way of reviewing products. One early item that I enjoyed was his demonstration of a very cool talking tennis racket.

Brian would also make valuable Main Menu contributions, including helping out with that challenging JAWS versus Window-eyes comparison.

For some time we also featured an hour-long technology show in Spanish, which aired before Main Menu.

Matters of faith were also covered on Mainstream, even though doing so didn't meet with universal approval. ACB has always acknowledged the importance of activities beyond advocacy. So it seemed to me that if the content was of a high technical standard, it was being produced by blind people, and the space existed in the schedule, there was no reason not to run it.

Very early on in Mainstream's history, we were approached by a duo, Cecilia Lee and David Andrus, who wanted to produce a show called Faith Matters. This had great production values, and ran on Mainstream for quite some time.

Dean Martineau, who I had come to know through various email lists and his excellent Sound Computing magazine, produced a show called Baha'i Perspectives. I found this show particularly interesting because it was a belief system I knew very little about until his show aired.

The ACB Radio Cafe is testimony to the many talented blind musicians in our community. Mainstream had a show for them too, Jeremy Hartley's Whole Note. It looked at a range of technologies and issues of interest to musicians.

It was important to have a show covering guide dog issues. Jenine Stanley stepped up to the plate, or perhaps that should be to the dog bowl, with her entertaining Canine Connection. This show submitted on behalf of ACB's guide dog affiliate, GDUI, was well-produced and popular.

Other great ACB programming was provided by the Bay State Council of the Blind and the Kentucky Council of the Blind.

Jim Snowbarger hosted an entertaining live talk show with Mike Bullis, called Bullis and the Snowman, where they discussed a range of blindness issues and took calls. The chemistry between them meant there was plenty of fun banter.

Dave Williams, about whom I'll have a lot more to say when we look later at ACB Radio Interactive, also put in an appearance on Mainstream with a very well-produced show called The UK Connection.

Chuck Ayers produced a range of shows of exceptional quality, including a great blend of music and thought-provoking talk called Think Tank.

And who can forget the amazing Blind Handyman show with Phil Parr and friends. A brilliant mix of entertainment and useful information, The Blind Handyman show sounded like a bunch of guys in Texas hanging out, shooting the breeze and having a great time. Along the way, there were plenty of practical tips about doing all kinds of things around the house when you don't have sight. As someone who will never be a handyman, I still picked up a lot of useful tips.

Phil also hosted a second show, Blind Like Me, in which he interviewed blind people in various professions and with a range of life experience.

Paul Merrell, who also featured on ACB Radio Interactive and for some time was the manager of our Treasure-Trove service, hosted a show on all things ham radio. This was very popular given the many blind people who take up this hobby.

Judy Redlich, a former TV journalist, gave us a couple of shows, The Christian Connection, and Cry Justice which tackled many difficult and challenging social issues.

Jean Parker gave us a look at wider disability issues, with Disability Radio Worldwide.

We enjoyed weekly explorations into destinations, with Patricia Lawrence's popular Travel Radio series.

As Paul Edwards requested when we announced ACB Radio in 1999, other providers of blindness content also got in touch. We were pleased to air Horizons, the weekly program of [Blind Citizens Australia](#). There is a wealth of great talking newspaper material being produced in the UK, and we aired quite a bit of it, including regular broadcasts of The National Talking Express, and Soundings.

Back in 2000 a lot of people still weren't familiar with how to get material to us in a digital form. So quite a bit of my time was spent receiving material on cassette, CD, or a format many have long forgotten about called minidisc, and digitising it for playback.

What we ended up with on Mainstream was an eclectic blend of high-quality talk content that covered everything from hard-hitting current affairs to faith and recreation.

There was always something interesting to hear. It's no wonder we called ACB Radio Mainstream the talk of the blind community.

## Chapter Eleven: Conventions

The National Convention is The American Council of the Blind's supreme governing authority. So covering the National Convention is ACB Radio's most important task. When I began doing just that at the 2000 convention in Louisville, the Internet streaming of live events was not commonplace. Asking a hotel for Internet access in the ballroom was an exceptional request.

I remember the weekend prior to the start of convention, striding around the hotel with Brian Charlson and his Seeing Eye dog Kegan, looking for an IT person who understood what we were on about. We'd done our best to state our requirements ahead of time, and finally, by the Sunday evening, we were ready to go.

The opening general session was a triumph for ACB Radio. The stream was rock-solid, people tuned in from around the world, and our email boxes were full of effusive praise.

But the technology gods were to have the last laugh. Despite us requesting a dedicated connection, we were sharing an ISDN connection, yes, ISDN, with the hotel staff. When they got back to work on Monday and everyone turned on their computers, the bandwidth no longer existed for us to send out our stream. We were able to make archives available after the event, but clearly after such a good start, it was a disappointment.

I spoke to the convention in 2000, introducing myself and ACB Radio, which had been founded since the 1999 convention. In that address I predicted there would come a time when blind people would be listening to ACB Radio on the bus with cell phone devices capable of streaming the Internet as if it were a pocket radio. Back then, it sounded like some sort of futuristic science-fiction.

We were in a well-wired facility in Iowa in 2001 that was still in the process of being built. Streaming was flawless. We were able to cover all sessions live, and upload the archives right after the session.

We began the practice of having a full team of ACB Radio Interactive broadcasters in the exhibit hall, whenever it was open. They would broadcast live to raise the awareness of convention-goers of ACB Radio, and it brought a little of the exhibit hall atmosphere to people back home. We would also give away the ACB Radio Promotional CD, which talked about what the service offered, and featured some sample programming. People could take this CD away with them, and play it at chapter meetings so more people knew what ACB Radio was about.

We would load up the computer in the exhibit hall with a wide range of music, and try to ensure that we had most common software configurations used by our broadcasters, including broadcast software and screen readers. This meant each presenter could broadcast live from the exhibit hall with confidence.

As in-room Internet became more common, we even had a few broadcasts on Interactive after hours, some of which, I think it's fair to say, were of a higher standard than others.

Despite a few glitches with hardware and logistics over the years, convention streaming definitely became easier.

Mindful that people would be listening both in the US and farther afield who weren't familiar with ACB's Constitution and procedures, I'd always take care when anchoring the coverage to provide plenty of context and explanation, for example explaining to listeners how voting is conducted.

One of the things I always looked forward to about covering conventions was working with Jay Dawdner and Mike Duke at the sound table. We enjoyed each other's company and were a great little team. It's so easy, when you're getting house audio, for listeners to miss out on the atmosphere within the room. With a combination of audio compression on the stream, and getting Jay and Mike to keep some microphones a little open, we were able to convey the live atmosphere.

Some radio information services also picked up the convention stream, and it could be heard via telephone.

There was one aspect of directing ACB Radio that I wasn't prepared for, and that's being recognised at convention by so many people. It is a really surreal feeling to have your voice recognised everywhere you go, to be greeted with exclamations of recognition when you do something simple like ask someone to press a floor number in an elevator, or order some food. I'd never experienced anything like that before, and it made me realise just what an impact ACB Radio was having.

Conventions were hard work, but they were also a chance to meet current and potential ACB Radio contributors and listeners, and catch up with people who had become friends. I remember those times with a lot of fondness.

## Chapter Twelve: ACB Radio Interactive

### The Whys, the Hows

Once Mainstream, the Cafe, and Treasure-Trove had been stabilised, I went back to my original idea of the Hear Today Network, putting a radio station together where blind people all over the world could present music shows. For this to work, I was always clear that it had to be about more than a bunch of people sharing a server and doing their show at an appointed time. It had to feel like we were all part of the same team, that there was some sort of glue that held it all together.

When planning ACB Radio Interactive, I thought about what it was that would encourage people to make the stream part of their regular listening. Why would they choose it over their local radio station, or something else on the Internet?

First, we were already building a strong sense of community through the other ACB Radio services. People enjoyed hearing other blind people presenting radio, talking about every-day things that might be going on in their lives, and that had a blindness angle to them.

Second, a lot of terrestrial radio was becoming very cookie-cutter and automated. I believed we could create radio like it was meant to be. I called the station ACB Radio Interactive because I wanted it to be all about the personal relationship between the listener and the presenter. We'd check email regularly during our shows and acknowledge the messages. Those of us who had access to Braille may even read out the emails. We'd sign into MSN Instant Messenger for even more immediate dialogue. We'd take requests, and we'd offer a great variety of music.

Using the PC-Audio list and ACB Radio's own lists, I asked for expressions of interest from people who might like to broadcast on such a service. We held an online meeting for those who responded. I think the voice chat technology we were using would probably have been HearMe.

Some people who showed up to that meeting had been doing streaming through Live 365 or other services, so had some useful technical experience. Others were full of enthusiasm but needed a lot of assistance, even to the point of getting advice about how to digitise their music collection.

The beginning of ACBRI predates [StationPlaylist Studio](#), which is now the most common tool used by blind people who broadcast on the Internet. The most basic means of streaming was achieved by playing songs from Winamp, using the Line Recording Plug-in whenever one wanted to talk. All the software in this configuration was free, however cross-fading wasn't possible, meaning there were album-like pauses between songs. It also wasn't possible to talk over the intros of tracks. We weren't overly concerned though, because our goal was to get a team big enough for us to make it on-air.

For those with some cash to spend, a powerful new tool then known as OtsJuke was available. Initially, this software didn't play MP3 files. It was necessary to convert all your music to its proprietary format. But if you had the money and were willing to do that, its cross-fading and compression produced a remarkable sound.

For those with two sound cards or a hardware speech synthesiser and the skills to make it happen, you could also use Winamp with plug-ins that would cross-fade songs, let you talk over intros, and get that sound on the air. But it required a fair degree of technical competence.

Having gathered the team who would be founding ACBRI presenters, we set up a server to do some quiet testing. We practiced working on a schedule, handing off from one presenter to another, and we experimented with different bit rates.

One of the first things we realised was that Live 365, which we were using at the beginning of ACBRI, dropped the listener every time a source disconnected. This meant that at the end of each broadcast we'd have to remind listeners to reconnect their player, unless they had Winamp on repeat.

We also had to give thought to how we made the stream sound like a cohesive radio station. I felt it was important to have promotional messages recorded for each show, so just as on any regular radio stations, presenters had pre-recorded messages to play, advertising the shows of other team members.

We also decided that everyone should use the same contact information so there was always the same way to get in touch with whoever was on-air, just as a terrestrial radio station always had the same phone number to contact the studio. This was a great concept, but it wasn't without risk. If the previous presenter left their mail client clearing email and hadn't set their client to leave mail on the server, the current presenter might think no one was communicating with them, while listeners would get frustrated that no one was being acknowledged.

These kinds of things are second nature now, but ACBRI was writing the rule book as we built the station.

### On The Air

We were ready to go on 2 September 2000 at 0 UTC. The fact that we were launching our fourth stream in nine months, and our most resource-intensive and technically ambitious at that, represented phenomenal growth.

This time the launch was far from a soft one. It featured a build-up which included a countdown designed to build the tension. I then opened the stream with a two-hour show, streamed in stereo, but still at a bitrate modem users could hear.

We were streaming at 24 kilobits per second, which meant each channel when in stereo was just 12 kilobits per second. The fact that it was stereo at all had a novelty factor, but most of us pretty quickly went back to mono, sacrificing the stereo for a little better fidelity.

To put this in some perspective, most people today who still use the MP3 codec would consider 128 kilobits per second the minimum acceptable bit rate for a stereo stream.

Listening to that first show now, it makes me smile to hear myself advising modem listeners that if they checked their mail or surfed the web while listening, chances were good that the stream would buffer due to them maxing out their bandwidth.

We would also encourage people to investigate FM transmitters which they could plug into their computer, so they could hear ACBRI on any standard FM radio in their house. [CCrane](#) sold one such device, and Mike Calvo who later founded [Serotek](#) was selling a product called The Radio Webcaster, which came with its own PC software and a nifty remote control. I had obtained and had built a kit set FM transmitter from a company called [Veronica](#), which I was very pleased with. This of course pre-dates the wide availability of Wi-Fi, and cell phones offering streaming capability.

Following my opening broadcast on ACBRI launch day was Steve Matzura with his Underground show. I'd been corresponding with Steve for quite some time via email, and when I put MBSFM online in Wellington he produced a pre-recorded rock show. From then on, he and I had a running gag over the fact that I didn't have, and wasn't interested in getting, any material by the group Strawberry Alarm Clock. So I was glad to give him his own show where he could play as much Strawberry Alarm Clock as he wanted.

Steve was very keen to be a part of ACBRI from the beginning, and was an important member of the team. As ACB Radio became larger, I worked with a great management team to keep things humming along, one of whom was Steve as ACB Radio Interactive's Programme Director.

Steve also helped us with the archiving of shows and promos. These days, chances are that people involved in projects like ACBRI are using cloud-based services to circulate station elements. That wasn't an option in 2000, so team members were required to become familiar with an FTP client. [FTP Voyager](#) had a great synchronise option, which looked at the folders on Steve's site containing station elements, compared it with what the presenter had on their local system, and synchronised. It did require team members to remember to sync regularly though.

Dave Williams, who was to succeed me as ACB Radio Director in July 2003, was also a founding ACBRI team member and did a fabulous stint as Programme Director. When I first heard Dave, I knew he was a natural. He has a fantastic radio voice and presence, and he is an absolute genius with audio production. More about putting those skills to work later.

Patrick Purdue was also with ACBRI at launch. Still only in his mid-teens, a lot of Patrick's audio had already gone viral before we knew what going viral meant. His singing and dramatic DecTalk offerings had attracted quite the following, and are still popular today. As well as hosting his show WPAT FM, he produced a number of promos and jingles, including some with singing DecTalks.

Geoff Shang and Amanda Tink from Australia were part of the original line-up. Geoff had taken an interest in the broadcasting work I was doing since the Hear Today test streams.

He contributed to ACBRI, and indeed ACB Radio as a whole, in a number of ways, particularly on the technical side which I'll cover later in this article.

Don Coco/DJC, who was already a familiar voice on Main Menu, joined us at launch and hosted his show, DJC's Jukebox, on ACBRI.

Although not present on launch weekend due to a Labour weekend bowling tournament, Will James and Denise Thompson were part of the founding group with their show Living on the Edge.

Doug Hunsinger, who opted to provide cover for presenters who needed it, was with ACBRI from the beginning, and hosted the first ever fill-in show on the station on its first day.

Scott Rutcowski from Australia was there at launch time with his show Worm FM.

Wayne Thompson, who was Wayne Michaels on the air, had an encyclopaedic knowledge of oldies and a great presentation style to match.

Many people thought we'd made a typo on the schedule when we added Riley Hyatt's show, Riley's Wreck, but in self-deprecating style, that's what he chose to call it.

The southern Drawl of Marvin Rush was perfect for ACB Radio Interactive's first country show. Later, he also branched out to do a folk show.

Noel Romey was there at launch to give us a little Celtic flavour, with his show the Celtic Source.

### [Come and Join Us](#)

It's worth mentioning at this point that ACB Radio took documentation very seriously. The website featured a Support Centre, where you could download the latest, or most accessible, version of all the major media players. We had help material answering frequently asked questions, and once

ACBRI was launched, we produced a lot of documentation explaining what was involved in becoming a broadcaster.

Once ACBRI was on the air, interest in becoming a part of it exploded. Initially, ACBRI was on during weekends, but we carefully expanded the schedule in both directions. At its peak, we were able to broadcast completely live programming for all but a few hours a week, which is an outstanding achievement.

We eventually made use of a Winamp song-requester plug-in for those times when we weren't on live, which we called DJ-U. This allowed listeners to interact with Interactive, even when someone wasn't live on the air. A few presenters with large and diverse music collections took turns at running the DJ-U system. When running, listeners could search the presenter's music collection via a web interface, and request a song. It was a lot of fun, and kept people locked in even when we couldn't be there.

Not long after ACB Radio Interactive arrived, we were joined by someone who was to make a significant contribution not just to ACBRI, but to blindness Internet radio at large as more stations jumped on the bandwagon over the years. Kelly Sapergia from Canada is great with audio production, and is also a musician. His trademark sound was achieved by using a software-based vocoder. Kelly produced a bunch of jingles for ACB Radio as a whole, and for individual presenters. His work can now be heard widely thanks to his jingle company, [KJS Productions](#).

On-air, Kelly presented a number of shows, including the popular new-age show Northern Lights.

Greg Brayton, who died earlier this year, was a genius and a joy to work with. Greg ran his own recording studio, Brayton and Sons. He was a very gifted musician, playing a range of instruments very well. He also knew how to put great production together, and owned the tools to do it. He too produced a range of jingles.

I first got to know Greg through the ACB Radio Cafe, when he sent me some of his music for inclusion. When sifting through the material, I heard his song "Wish You Could See", about the impact of his blindness on relationships, and it just stopped me in my tracks. It was, and is, incredibly moving. There were few dry eyes in the house when I asked him to perform it as part of ACB Radio's convention banquet entertainment in Des Moines in 2001.

In that collection of music was an instrumental version of one of his songs, Favourite Fantasy. It was a catchy wee tune, and I would use it regularly as the music people could tune into just before Blind Line, a little like shortwave radio stations have interval signals.

Greg presented a number of shows, including a brilliant jazz show, and a programme featuring music recorded in his studio called Studio Time.

One day I received an email from a man simply calling himself Roger. He said he had done some radio work in the past, but would need a lot of help with the streaming side, which he knew nothing about. I agreed to do all I could. Roger was intending to use a lot of traditional equipment, such as CD and even vinyl. He had a mixer, so he was mainly wanting to do radio in the conventional way and just get the results online.

Eventually, we had him up and running, and ready to do a test on our test server. Roger was the real deal. Not only had he clearly done commercial radio before, but he also had a bunch of liners recorded by people like Paul McCartney, Stevie Wonder, and many others. He called himself Roger Kool, and when I heard that name, I couldn't believe it. When I was a kid, I was always interested in

finding out if blind people were doing what I desperately wanted to do, work in radio. A friend of my older brother had returned from Singapore, where she said she had been listening to a brilliant blind DJ named Roger Kool. So long before he got in touch with me, I knew of him, and he was kind of a mentor. All those years ago, without even knowing him, he gave me hope that I could achieve my dream, and now we were on the same team. Roger had relocated to Canada by this time.

Speaking of Singapore, Edwin Khoo hosted a show, which broadened our horizons and gave us music and other content in Chinese.

Jim Snowbarger eventually made it to ACBRI, hosting his Stuck in the 70s show. He also had great production talent and all the gear to go with it.

### What a Difference a Year makes

ACB Radio had come a long way since that new year of 2000, where we did all that crazy hit-and-miss business with the phone patch to try and get new year celebrations on the air.

My family's relocation from Wellington to Whanganui meant that MBSFM in Wellington had closed down. We took our time setting it up again in Whanganui, with a new transmitter and a very tall mast. Anyone who can count knows that you don't start counting from 0. Therefore, 2001 was in fact the beginning of the new millennium, and I wanted us to celebrate it in style. We held the opening of MBSFM Whanganui back until 6 PM on 31 December, and hosted a 12-hour special which was simulcast on ACBRI.

Gary Adler came over for the event from Australia. We set off plenty of fireworks outside the studio, and yes, they were real fireworks, and talked with people from around the world.

When we were done with our 12-hour celebration, we handed over to ACBRI team members around the globe for new year. A far cry indeed from our meagre efforts just 12 months before.

### Voices Through the Years

There were many talented people who were part of the ACBRI team. I am no doubt going to forget someone important. Please accept my apology for that, there is no deliberate omission. But for those of you were listening at the time, here are a few other names that might bring some memories flooding back for you.

Jason (JJ) Meddaugh and his show Internet Party Radio was a fixture on ACBRI in its first year. On the air he called himself J Squared. The show played current music and even featured a few home-grown and clever sketches, including one on NFB television, capitalising on the audio description debate that was raging at the time. If you were lucky, you might win a CD from his prize closet.

Jason was not only great on the air, he was also a natural entrepreneur, as his later ventures have shown. He did a great job putting some clever promotions together.

It's always been my view that Internet radio should be as exciting as the best terrestrial radio, so prizes and fun ways of winning them were an integral part of the programming.

The most successful and ambitious promotion J.J. put together was a promotion we announced at the ACB convention in Iowa in 2001, which gave away a desktop PC with very good specs for its time.

The person who won that PC was Steve Nomer, who later, perhaps even on that very PC, became an ACBRI broadcaster, hosting his show Hey Baby, They're Playing Our Song.

If pulsating beat was more your thing, Chris Nestrud would deliver, with his weekly techno dance show The Adrenalin Rush.

Jeff Harris joined the ACBRI team quite early in its history, hosting a show called Jeff's Jamboree, in which he played a wide variety of music from his extensive collection. His point of difference was his "Jamboree Guarantee", which was a promise not to talk over the intros of songs. Totally opposite from me, who loves to talk over the intros of songs.

Jeff is also gifted with a range of software development skills, including PHP. He now develops the popular Song Requester script for StationPlaylist Studio, and back in the ACBRI days was helping people integrate similar technology into their show websites. Those websites were not hosted on the ACB Radio domain. Doing so with the technology available at the time was complex, since there was no content management system where we could easily set permissions on a per-user basis. Presenters therefore hosted their own websites, which often contained links to their most recent shows, and means of getting in touch with the presenter between shows. Jeff helped us group these sites together on the ACBRI site to help build that cohesion we were striving for, through the ACB Radio Interactive Broadcasters' Web Ring.

I'm not sure when web rings went out of fashion, but it was certainly years ago. Web rings were a series of sites that were somehow united by a common theme. You could choose a link to go to a random site in the ring, or just work your way through the list of participating sites. All participating ACBRI presenters had the web ring code on their own sites, meaning it was easy for listeners to move from one presenter's site to another. Jeff's skills in this area were helpful not just for the web ring and song requesting, but for some other clever things we were achieving with the ACB Radio website.

Marlaina Leiberg was soon enthusiastically on board with ACBRI, hosting a number of shows over the years, including The Softer Side, which played "music for your heart". Later, she hosted a show called Time for Folks, featuring a very interesting promo created with the help of a harmoniser, and offering "a cup of coffee and a virtual piece of pie".

One of the most worthwhile aspects of projects like ACBRI is that it can help people to try things outside their comfort zone, and build confidence. There's nothing more exciting than someone who has been a loyal listener making the jump to the other side of the microphone. Shannon Reece had been listening to ACB Radio for some time, then became a presenter, hosting her show Reece's Pieces.

I also remember Shannon's contribution to the first edition of an old show under a new name. I'd been doing my Sunday Smorgasbord show since ACBRI started, but moved it out of the weekend in the hope that I could get a bit more time with the family and to recharge. You can't have a show on Thursday called The Sunday Smorgasbord, and that's why I renamed it The Mosen Explosion back in 2002. On that first episode, Shannon and her family had organised an exchange of cookies with my family. They sent us girl scout cookies, and we sent them our girl guide cookies. It wasn't a very equitable exchange, to be honest. We'd never had the American cookies before, and were super impressed with all the varieties you could get. Samoas are my favourite, just in case anyone wants to send me some more. We can't get them here.

I think we could only offer Shannon's family two varieties. But it was a fun cultural exchange.

Maureen Schulz hosted her show with a folk-emphasis, Maureen's Cafe. Maureen was also a strong supporter and regular listener from the beginning, and I worked with her so she could come on this

side of the microphone. Her show was always full of many songs I'd not heard before, often with strong messages.

Mike Gorman joined the team, with his remarkable musical knowledge and massive musical collection. His shows included Mike's Mess and the 78 Decades show.

And who said ACB Radio Interactive isn't for lovers? Mike and Maureen met through the station, and have been sweethearts ever since. Indeed, many close and long-lasting friendships were formed thanks to being part of the ACBRI team.

Kevin Minor was with us from very early on, consistently hosting his Anything and Everything show over the years.

Nikki Keck was a part of the team from early on, and hosted a show called Your Favourite Blend. Later, her husband Merv also became a part of the team, with his Country Bumpkin Show.

Like many ACBRI presenters, Nikki ran her own web page for her show. On it, she talked about how ACBRI made a dream come true for her. It's worth reading, because her story is similar to many who took the plunge and acquired the skills to get on the air.

"Ever since I was a child, I wanted to be a deejay. Teachers discouraged me from this, telling me you needed a communications degree and that it required a lot of math. (I was no good in math) However, I have always been fascinated by broadcasting and loved music. I used to sit in my room with two tape recorders playing songs and talking to an imaginary audience and pretending to be a deejay. Of course, my father was not crazy about this and just thought I was talking to myself. Anyway, when I first heard about the ACB Radio Interactive project, I admired all those who took part in it. I thought that it was probably too hard and complicated for me to get into. However, one day on a whim I decided to click on the link on the Interactive page on how to host your own show, and I read it and started thinking maybe I could do it. I got the necessary plugins but for some reason had trouble, so I broadcasted my station on easycast for a time. However, one night on accessible chat, I ran into Jonathan Mosen, who is the general manager of ACB Radio. He, and a few others, encouraged me to try again. Eventually I was able to get my show up and running live and was auditioned, and accepted, to be a part of ACB Radio Interactive.

Now I use Otsjoke and a hardware speech synthesizer called the DoubleTalk LT to do my broadcasting."

David (later Desyree) Vaughan produced a number of shows during her time with the station, including Desyree's Music Box.

One of our youngest broadcasters, Jess Smith would host his regular weekly show from North Carolina.

Michael Capelle hosted the Mike C show, specialising in songs that were out of the ordinary or had a novelty element.

Tom Dekker gave us an international blend of music with his World Beat Toronto show.

Steve Bauer had been listening to ACB Radio for some time. He was running a telephone-based information service and also had broadcasting experience. He had a voice that was perfect for

promos and other voiceover work, so it was great when he decided to become a part of the station and host a smooth jazz show.

Another regular listener, Joy Tilton, eventually made it on air with her fun show, The Joy Ride. Joy is also a great singer and musician, and she produced a spontaneous and popular show.

Jerad Jicha, known on the air as Jammin' Jerry, joined the team and initially began with an 80s show, but branched out into a range of formats. Jerry had a lively style and a strong on-air presence. During his time with ACBRI, he would also sometimes co-host with Amanda Rush.

It would be very hard to find someone who could beat Aad Leiflang in an alphabetical list of presenters. Aad is from the Netherlands. Capitalising on the English expression "double Dutch", he called his intriguing blend of music Triple Dutch.

Plenty of people love comedy and novelty material, and it featured quite regularly in many ACBRI shows. But comedy and novelty were what Byron Lee's show, The Fun Zone, was all about, and it was very popular.

Some shows on ACBRI were mellow, others were loud. After Dark, with Matthew Janusauskas, was most definitely in the former category. Talking softly into the microphone and playing night-time kind of music, the show was a great way to unwind with a nightcap if you were in the right time zone to do that.

By contrast, Bob Kanish's show, The All 70s Extravaganza Bonanza, was outrageously loud. Bob gave us a fast-paced patter, complete with jingles and sound effects. It all came together to sound just like top 40 radio in the 70s.

Moving down in the world, lots of us spent many happy hours in Pemberton's basement. Jim Pemberton also had a commercial radio background, with a great voice for on-air and promo work.

To give us some alternative perspective, Paul Merrell was a part of ACBRI when he wasn't busy doing a fantastic job with Treasure-Trove, hosting The Alternative Mix. Towards the end of my time with ACB Radio, I would follow Paul with a show called Beatle Beat, playing music of the Beatles together and separately. Paul would always finish his preceding show with a very...alternative cover of a Beatles song. I have no idea where he got them all from, but some of them were absolutely dreadful! Sorry Paul.

Ray Mahorney, after being a listener for some time, made the jump from listener to presenter. Ray had also had a commercial radio background and had the delivery style and technique to show for it. He would sometimes intersperse his selections, which tended to have a classic rock emphasis, with a bit of political comment. More on that aspect of his show later.

Chris Skarstad became a member of the team much later on, with his show Toonhead Music, which, much to my delight, featured a regular sprinkling of Beatles music.

Country music fans looked forward to Cory Jackson, and his show Cory's Country Cavalcade, which placed an emphasis on classic country. Plenty of Jim Reeves, Patsy Klein, and others were to be heard.

If Jimmy Buffet and similar music was your thing, Barry Campbell and Kim Lookingbill, who loved cruising and being parrot-heads, did some great shows together and separately.

As a very young guy, Liam Irvin would head home from school and host The Liam show, complete with its very catchy promo song.

From the UK and Europe, we featured broadcasters such as Reg Web, Wally Harding with Wally Worldwide, Darren Paskell with Soccer Saturday, Axel Schruhl with Germany Calling, the Music Hall with Robby Gordon, and Tony B with Tony's Music Mix.

On the other side of the world, David Truong and Robyn Grundy hosted their popular show, The Aussie Kaleidoscope. Robyn later branched out and hosted a show of her own, The Happy Hour.

Later to become well known in assistive technology circles through his work for GW Micro, Raul Gallegos was also a part of the ACBRI team.

And speaking of things Window-eyes, Carlos Taylor, who had put together some great Window-eyes-related material for Main Menu, also made it to ACBRI to host an 80s show.

Chris Sells hosted a four-hour show on the station for some time which he called Chris's Classics.

### [A Visit to Lucky Larry's](#)

Chris Ramsay joined ACBRI to present his Ramsay Oldies show on 1 April 2001, and brought with him his musical knowledge of the period and his collection. You may ask why I'm able to be so specific about the date. That's because he followed one of the most fun, extraordinary, and controversial shows I've ever done in my radio career.

I used to love radio April fool jokes, and had heard about some legendary ones. A broadcaster here was suspended in the 1950s for telling people there was a massive plague of wasps over Auckland city. He offered some protective remedies that were clearly ridiculous, but which people attempted by the thousands. The streets were deserted, people didn't go into work, and the broadcaster was in a lot of hot water.

There were many other April fool examples, but there was also the panic caused by the Mercury Theatre's production of H G Wells's The War of the Worlds in 1938. I always had this secret ambition to pull something off that well. And I am a bit of a prankster by nature.

On Saturday 31 March 2001, Jeff Harris couldn't do his Jeff's Jamboree show, so I filled in for him. And yes, I was even able to restrain myself, stick to the jamboree guarantee, and not talk over any intros. At the beginning of that show, I had no plans to do anything particularly different for April fool's day. But as I sat there doing the show, the tiny spec of an idea started to form in my head. I decided that we would tell ACBRI listeners via our usual communication channels that we had been given a grant by the Lucky Larry's Charitable Trust. No such trust exists. Lucky Larry, we said, operated a casino in Whanganui, the town in New Zealand in which I was now living. There are no casinos in Whanganui.

The grant was for \$5,000 in New Zealand currency, which at that time would have equated to about \$2,400 US. All people had to do, we said, was to listen to my show, still at that point called the Sunday Smorgasbord, make a request, stay listening, and see if their name would be drawn for the cash prize at the end of the show.

The question then was, how do I pull this off and make it sound reasonably authentic. I rigged up a system where I had a sound card running into a separate channel of my mixer, with a cheap hand-held microphone plugged into the sound card. I had Winamp running on repeat, with a loop of background crowd ambience. I set the levels so it was necessary for me to talk loudly into the microphone, just as if I were talking loudly at a live event to be heard over the noise. People listening closely would have heard a few tell-tale signs, like the same baby crying in the loop, but for most people who weren't listening for such signs it sounded authentic.

The number of listeners we had for the show was ridiculously high, especially since the show started at 2 AM Eastern time, and people had to listen all the way through to see if their name was called. We were inundated with requests. I got various people into the studio, including Amanda and our nanny Aimee, to describe the casino in vivid detail.

The most important thing to decide was how to end this thing. The prudent way to do that would have been to do the draw, and to announce that the winner's first name was April, and their last name was Fool. That would have annoyed enough people, and after the event there were some very grumpy people who had lost a night's sleep over five thousand bucks that never existed. But I didn't choose the prudent option.

Just as Lucky Larry was to do the draw, an armed gunman burst into the casino, determined to snatch the cash prize. He started shooting. After a bit of mayhem, the stream dramatically fell silent for a number of seconds, at which point "A Day In The Life" by the Beatles started to play. It sounded like someone else had taken over the stream because of the silence.

At the end of the song, I came on, sounding sombre and full of reverb, to say that I had been in the studio all along, and thanking people for listening to the Sunday Smorgasbord for April Fool's day.

The trouble was, by this time a number of panic-stricken people had stopped listening because of the state they were in. We started getting emails and messages asking if anyone knew whether I was OK. I had to reassure them that it was all part of a carefully orchestrated prank.

In 2014, where mass shootings are far more common particularly in the US, I wouldn't dream of doing anything like that. And indeed if I had to do it again, I think I would have gone for a less dramatic ending. But even now, there are people who remember that broadcast, say how convincing it was, and chuckle about the fact that I got them good.

### Growing Pains

One year on, ACB Radio Interactive was doing very well, at least on the surface. But not all was rosy. Managing a large team over the Internet was something not many people had done before, and it was certainly not something I had done before. Hindsight is a wonderful thing, but I'm sure I could have acted more decisively on seeds of disquiet before they had the chance to grow.

An additional source of potential friction was that ACBRI was a very big tent. Not only was there a wonderfully eclectic mix of programming, but the team came from a wide variety of cultures and backgrounds, with varying degrees of experience being part of a team. Some people were very young and impressionable, others were well-seasoned professionals who knew what it took to be a part of a well-functioning, cohesive team.

There may well have been a case to be made for yet another stream, a separate youth channel. At the time, I felt that another commitment of that magnitude would have spread our resources too thin.

ACBRI had a brand. Every product does. Ours was that we provided quality entertainment that was fairly family friendly. That's not to say that I'm opposed to more edgy content, I'm not. But ACB Radio had a strategic plan we were working within. Increasingly, schools for the blind were being equipped with some excellent digital computing facilities, including studios. It wouldn't have been a stretch to get their tech people to install the software on those computers that would allow them to participate in ACB Radio. It would have enhanced our output, and been a great networking opportunity for the kids. They'd meet adult blind role models, get to talk with people who knew how radio and audio production worked, and get the chance to broadcast to the world via a well-

established network backed by a credible national blindness organisation. To make all that happen, we had to sound good whenever a teacher or parent tuned in.

One thing I had come to appreciate during the 21 Months I had been running ACB Radio by September 2001 was that there are parts of America that are very morally conservative. For this reason, I declined to accept a promo featuring the full announcement that came with Winamp, in which the voiceover says, "it really whips the lama's ass". I made that decision because, believe it or not, I had had complaints from some ACB Radio listeners who had downloaded Winamp from our website, and were offended by the voiceover. They held ACB Radio responsible, even though we had no control over what Winamp put in their distribution. So when it came to the promo, I didn't think it was worth risking offending people.

I made that decision just a few hours before we began our first birthday party celebrations, which many people had invested a lot of work in. Dave Williams, for example, produced an incredible montage over Stevie Wonder's Happy Birthday, featuring greetings from all the current presenters.

But clearly, there was an element who were angry with my decision. They could have asked for a staff meeting to debate what kind of content was acceptable and what was not. If they were dissatisfied with the outcome of that process and felt I was being too conservative, they had the right to appeal to ACB's Board of Publications. What two of them chose to do instead, however, was to sabotage the birthday weekend many had worked so hard for, by reading an explicit passage from Playboy live on air. It was father's day in New Zealand, and I was inside with the radio tuned to our FM transmitter which was broadcasting ACBRI. My five-year-old daughter was in the room, and I couldn't get her out of it fast enough.

Immediately, complaints came flooding in, and once the offending show was finished I fired the presenters on the spot. If that behaviour's not serious misconduct, it's hard to know what is.

This provoked a number of resignations in sympathy. Negativity is contagious, and there's no doubt some resented the kind of disciplined approach to broadcasting that I felt was necessary in order for us to deliver quality output. It was a challenging time, but in the end, it was the best thing that could have happened to ACBRI. We lost a few good broadcasters, but we also lost pretty much all the people who were negatively undermining the team dynamic behind the scenes. It was like lancing a boil. It was painful, but it was worth it. Their absence encouraged better team players to join the station.

When I listen to recordings of ACB Radio Interactive from 2002 and 2003, you can hear the difference. Production values were outstanding.

### Festive Fun

That sense of cohesion was always important to me, and we were striving to make ACBRI sound like a unit. One way I thought we could advance that goal, and have a whole bunch of fun in the process, was for us to produce a song each Christmas. The idea was that we would pick at least one Christmas song. Sometimes we'd have so much talent and enthusiasm that we'd get two recorded. Songs we produced included "Jingle Bells", "We Wish You a Merry Christmas", "Winter Wonderland", "Rudolf the Red Nosed Reindeer", and "The Christmas Song". I particularly enjoyed Rudolf, because Greg Brayton went into the studio and produced a great, rocking backing track for it. On most occasions, we'd use karaoke backing tracks.

Greg Brayton, Roger Kool and others had a hand in producing these complex masterpieces, but the king of the Christmas single was Dave Williams. Imagine getting 30 or 40 dry vocal contributions,

sung by people with different microphones and vocal ability, interspersed with funny one-liners. Dave just had the knack of knowing what to slot in when, and he really made these singles sound like we were all in the same room, having a party. The listeners loved them, and it made all of us who participated in them realise we were indeed part of a special team.

## Chapter Thirteen: Beyond the Streams

It was my job to continue to monitor Internet trends, not only of a technical nature, but also relating to the way people use and consume content. Terms like "web portal" and "sticky content" became commonplace in Internet circles. We wanted to be sure ACB Radio's site was a place people came back to on a regular basis. There were a couple of ways we sought to encourage that, beyond our streams and growing library of on-demand content.

The first was the ACB Radio newsroom. The Internet was finally delivering unprecedented access to news in a way that had at least the promise of being accessible to blind people. Some websites were less accessible than others, and screen readers were less advanced than they are now. So a lot of material was tantalisingly close, but not easy to use, particularly for novice screen reader users.

The ACB Radio Newsroom used a technology whose name I have long-since forgotten, to organise news headlines and stories in a logical, accessible way. Pages were accessed frequently and the service was welcomed by its regular users.

ACB Radio was given its own chat room on the Audio tips service. George Buys, who founded and managed Audio Tips, was always supportive of ACB Radio. We were seeking to achieve the same thing – bring blind people together through today's technology. So we were thrilled to partner with George.

We eventually set up an Internet voice chat community using iVocalize technology. It was partially a complement to ACB Radio programming, since presenters could use chat rooms as a conduit to their shows, but it was also able to be used for other discussions. We called the community Our Place. It featured a range of rooms for discussions about all kinds of topics.

We were always looking at ways to extend our reach beyond the Internet. Some of our Mainstream programmes could be heard by radio information services. Some ACBRI programming was being carried by a few low power FM stations. And we also made Mainstream available by phone in the UK thanks to a service called Phone Anything.

Speaking of the phone, ACB Radio made it on to a popular voice portal in the United States called TellMe. TellMe unveiled a system allowing third-party extensions, which were based on XML. Some of our talented team put the extension together, and our TellMe presence was born.

## Chapter Fourteen: The End of the Free Lunch

During the height of the Dot-Com bubble, so much was available for free. People were excited about what one might be able to do with this new medium, without giving a lot of thought in many cases to how you'd monetise these services in order to keep the lights on, the staff paid, and the business sustainable. Eventually, reality set in.

I mentioned when discussing the launch of ACB Radio that our Announce and Friends lists were originally hosted by eGroups. They were moved from this service when, in order to try and encourage people to click through to embedded ads, they started placing advertisements at the top of messages before you got to the body of the email. Some screen reader users didn't have a problem skipping the ads, others found them an outrageous intrusion. But we were about being inclusive, and didn't want to cause novice screen reader users any difficulty by making them sift through ads they didn't want. eGroups suffered not only within the blind community, but among sighted users as a result of this change. They were eventually acquired by Yahoo! who reversed the policy.

Live 365 was feeling the pinch as well, and looking for a business model that made their streaming service viable in the long-term. They started by inserting random audio ads into their streams, which didn't go down well with many of ACB Radio's listeners. Then they adopted a model which charged professional or commercial broadcasters. As a not-for-profit, we didn't anticipate ACB Radio would be affected by this, but that wasn't to be the case. Without warning, we received a stern email from Live365 demanding that we pay up, and giving us a very short time to do it. I don't recall precisely how much they wanted, but it was a significant sum for us.

This put the future of ACB Radio in serious question. An urgent conference call of ACB's Internet Committee was organised, comprising President Paul Edwards, Brian Charlson, Chris Gray, and others. It was crunch time for ACB. Were they committed to ACB Radio in the long-term?

All members of the Committee were determined to find a way forward, and Chris came up with a specific proposal which was endorsed by the committee. Between us, we developed a two-pronged strategy. Chris ensured that funds were raised to keep Live365 happy in the short term. Second, a group of us began work on transferring ACB's web presence to a dedicated server, work which gathered pace once Chris Gray became ACB President in July 2001.

It was the right thing to do. There had been previous issues with the provider of ACB's web presence, which involved data loss. Storage was far more expensive then, so backing up was far more complex. Moving to a dedicated server for all things ACB gave us much more flexibility and control.

We were able to take full advantage of the opportunities presented to us by this transition, thanks to some of the most skilled people anyone could hope to work with in those circumstances. People including Matt Campbell, Geoff Shang, Jeff Harris and others worked some great magic. Earlene Hughes, who was looking after ACB.org, was also of great help.

For me, an urgent matter to be resolved as we transitioned away from Live365 was how we'd handle automation. Mainstream, Treasure-Trove and the Cafe were all largely automated thanks to Live365's Easycast service. We needed something to replace it, and Marc Mulcahey stepped up to the plate. Marc had worked for Blazie and Freedom Scientific for some time, and subsequent to his involvement with ACB Radio founded [Levelstar](#). Marc sat down with me and discussed what ACB Radio would need. He came up with a powerful system called PRS. PRS could schedule pre-recorded

programmes in a way that accounted for recurrences and variations, facilitate the transition to a live event without the need to disconnect the stream, add a touch of dynamic compression to ensure consistency of volume, and it even had its own mixer in the software. It's user interface might perhaps be described as a bit quirky and geeky, but we had one heck of an automation system.

Matt Campbell developed our own broadcast server, which he called Simplecast.

Geoff Shang, a proponent of open source and the OGG Vorbis audio format in particular, looked after transcoding so we were able to offer great quality streams at lower bit rates. The convergence of the wider availability of broadband connections, coupled with better audio compression technology, meant that ACB Radio kept sounding better and better.

We were also able to add some nice touches to the ACB Radio site. Our schedules for Mainstream and Interactive incorporated code Geoff Shang had developed, so people could see the schedule in their local time zone. Gone was the need to try and do all that complicated conversion, which may change depending on what time of year it was.

It's hard to overstate the degree to which ACB Radio benefited from this group of people with extensive technical knowledge, and the creativity to put that technical knowledge to work for ACB Radio in innovative ways.

Chris Gray deserves thanks and praise for his determination to give ACB Radio a more sound footing in a post-Dot-Com bubble world. It would have been easy to pull the plug, particularly given increasingly tight finances within the organisation, but he was resolute and decisive exactly when that was needed.

ACB Radio began carrying sponsorship announcements. [Verizon](#), [the American Foundation for the Blind](#), and [The Seeing Eye](#) were all proud sponsors of ACB Radio. Their sponsorship earned them NPR-Style acknowledgements.

We also partnered with an Internet service provider, Easy Access USA. For just \$19.95 per month, you could get unlimited dial-up Internet access. \$4 per month was donated to ACB Radio. Kelly Sapergia even produced a catchy wee jingle to encourage people to sign up.

## Chapter Fifteen: All Things Must Pass

As I stated when setting the scene for my involvement with ACB Radio, in 1999 I resigned my position as a senior manager at New Zealand's blindness agency because it had become impossible to keep my job, and keep my integrity. I remained President of New Zealand's consumer organisation.

It's important to be true to your values, and to stand for what you believe in. There's no better example of that than to note that at the time of my departure from ACB Radio, New Zealand's organised blind had succeeded with the implementation of a new framework for the Foundation, in which blind people directly elected the Board.

Proving that you just never know what surprises life has in store, I became Chairman of the Foundation for the Blind in 2002, leading it through the transition to the new model.

My work chairing that Board, which was responsible for a budget many times larger than that of ACB, gave me exposure to current best-practice information about governance. Governance is not management. Typically, a governing board should supervise only one employee, it's Chief Executive, with the possible exception of someone the Board may employ to carry out administrative or other tasks pertaining to the governance function.

What that means is that if I had an issue with the way a particular staff member was doing their job, my beef was with the CEO, and my Board and I would hold the CEO responsible for the performance of the organisation as a whole. Were I to speak to the employee directly, it would blur reporting lines. People need to know unambiguously to whom they report, and a manager must know that they can exercise their authority without being undermined.

These principles matter. They prevent chaos, dysfunction, and organisational paralysis.

In the context of ACB, an additional important restriction of presidential authority applies, and that relates to operational matters pertaining to ACB publications.

I got on well personally with Chris Gray, who assumed the presidency in July 2001 following the constitutionally mandated expiry of Paul Edwards's tenure. He was the first person to let me know that ACB was contemplating setting up an Internet radio service. He consistently championed ACB Radio with his words and actions, playing the leading role in pulling us out of a financial crisis that may have ended it altogether. Like me, he's passionate about Braille. He's a jazz fan, and he introduced me to some pretty serious Bourbon when we were in Louisville. I make this point because it saddens me that increasingly, it seems that people who disagree with someone's views label them a bad person. Chris is a great guy, but we do see questions of leadership and ACB publications differently.

Alarm bells started to ring for me when Ray Mahorney, an ACBRI presenter who has never made any secret of his alignment with the political right in the US, made some comments of a political nature on his show. I don't recall what those comments were specifically, but I am fairly sure they related in some way to the United Nations.

Chris emailed Ray directly, saying that he didn't agree with the remarks and that he was tuning in to be entertained, not to be exposed to these sorts of political views.

Ray's politics and mine are like the proverbial chalk and cheese. But the fact was, ACB Radio Interactive had no policy banning political comment by presenters. There's an argument that there should have been such a policy, and I understand that argument. Maybe politics belonged on Mainstream alone, and ACBRI was the place you could go to be assured of entertainment that could give you some escape from the highly –charged political discourse of the time. This was post-9'11, and the US was heading into a controversial war with Iraq that some considered to be illegitimate.

So whether we should permit political expression on ACBRI was a discussion we might have had as a matter of policy. However, there was no such policy when Ray said what he did, and it was therefore my duty to defend Ray's right to express his views, given that he had breached no policy.

Chris was an enthusiastic ACBRI listener, and I know that wasn't just because he was ACB President. He was a regular listener before taking office. He supported ACB, liked ACB Radio and enjoyed the content and interaction. But when you assume the office of the presidency, anything you might say carries much more weight. So if you as a presenter are contacted by a listener who also happens to be ACB President, it can be difficult to know if you're being admonished as any listener who disagrees with you might, or whether you're on the receipt of a formal reprimand from the president.

This is where good governance practices come in. If the President had a problem with ACBRI content, the Director of ACB Radio is the place to bring it, either to express concern about a particular staff member, or to discuss a wider policy question.

I became increasingly concerned by what in my view was inappropriate interference with matters relating to ACB media, particularly the Braille Forum and it's letters to the editor column.

My role as Director of ACB Radio gave me ex-officio status on ACB's Board of Publications. While some BOP members shared my concern, it soon became clear that the then Chairman, Charlie Hodge, was more concerned with pleasing the President who put him there than upholding the constitutional principles the BOP existed to protect.

Freedom of the press was one of the key reasons ACB old-timers say they left the NFB to start a new organisation in 1961.

I still have a lot of correspondence from 2003, which I see no value in rehashing in this article, but reading it has served to refresh my memory. Executive Director Charlie Crawford, astute as ever, warned that attempts to stifle debate about Board decisions via the Forum's letter to the editor column, and certain emails sent by the President to the then editor of the Braille Forum, may well precipitate a constitutional crisis.

It's important to keep in mind that back in 2003, while an increasing number of blind people were online, Braille or cassette copies of the Braille Forum were still the only way a good number of blind people had of being exposed to news and debate about ACB. That made it critical that the Forum wasn't turned into some sort of Soviet-style publication. A particularly unpopular decision taken by the Board, its decision not to sign onto a complaint made against the Iowa Department for the Blind by a guide dog handler, provoked letters to the editor which were overwhelmingly opposed to the Board's position. Indeed, the National Convention, as the supreme governing body, later over-ruled the Board. Yet as political leaders often do when unpopular, the President was turning on ACB's media for reporting the mood of the membership.

I became more vocal at BOP meetings, but it was clear to me that even those who were troubled by the path the organisation was taking didn't seem to appreciate that a showdown, a constitutional

crisis if you will, was inevitable. They seemed to be determined to find some kind of peaceful resolution that could not occur if the integrity of ACB publications was to be preserved.

I had also suffered a substantial pay cut during my time with ACB Radio. I was now being paid for 40 hours a week. In reality, the job took much more time than that, and that limited my ability to seek other consultancy work. The pay cut was due to the changing exchange rate. When I took on ACB Radio in 1999, one New Zealand Dollar cost about 42 US cents. By mid-2003 it cost over 60. That's a big reduction, and it was getting tough to make mortgage payments.

Had that been the only concern, I'm sure we could have found some way forward. But when I took on the ACB Radio role, as recounted earlier in this article, I sought and got assurances from then President Paul Edwards about the independence of ACB publications. Under the new regime, I felt that those assurances no longer applied.

I was always fortunate to be approached from time to time by different organisations with attractive offers. None had interested me seriously up until this point, because ACB Radio really was my dream job. But it was time for me to follow up.

From time to time, NFB had talked about setting up an Internet radio service, and I began serious discussions at a senior level about what that might involve. Fortunately, we weren't able to move forward. I say fortunately not because I couldn't work with NFB, I'm glad to enjoy cordial relations with leaders in both US consumer organisations. But in 2006, I caused a major firestorm in the blind community just for doing something sighted people do on a regular basis – going from one technology company to a competitor. If I had gone from ACB to NFB, it would have been far more unpleasant given the acrimony that is felt by some members of each organisation to the other.

I accepted an offer made to me by Pulse Data International. I'd known their founder and CEO, Russell Smith, since I was a kid, and was delighted to be asked if I'd be interested in becoming their product manager for their blindness products.

Having made the decision to go, it was important to me not to use ACB Radio as a platform for my concerns, and to discharge my remaining duties professionally.

I made the announcement public on Friday, 20 June 2003. I said the following:

"Good evening from New Zealand. Over the last three and a half years, I've been privileged to work with a group of people who've provided a place for blind people from all over the world to broadcast a wide range of programming. Some of it has been aimed directly at the blind community. Most of it has been of interest to a wide audience, and has helped to change perceptions about blindness in the minds of many sighted listeners.

When I started in the ACB Radio role, we had no ACB Radio. Then, there was pretty much me and a collection of old time radio shows. Now, a hard working team of over 60 volunteers in nine countries, working on its own server with a state of the art broadcast automation system, makes the station what it is. That team will no doubt continue to innovate, inform and entertain. But it is time for me to move on to new and exciting challenges outside of ACB Radio.

I advised the President of ACB yesterday of my intention to resign in mid-July. I have accepted an exciting offer of employment that will, like ACB Radio, be rewarding and challenging, but in very different ways.

I'm proud to leave ACB Radio in a vibrant state, still going strong when many other such ventures are just distant memories.

I have been humbled by how many people listen to the shows I've been fortunate enough to produce for ACB Radio, and in the last three and a half years I've come to know many of our listeners well. So I appreciate that this kind of change is not easy for some to accept. But the fact is, ACB Radio is strong. It will continue and grow to be even bigger and better than before. I may have been the front person for ACB Radio, and the person paid to look after it and produce a range of programmes, but ACB Radio is full of talent that will keep it afloat.

This is, of course, not goodbye, there is the Convention to look forward to and another month of ACB Radio for me before I move on. So let's enjoy each other's company and look forward to the future with pride and excitement. Thank you all for your support of ACB Radio and of my own role in it. It's been special, it's been fun, but the time has come for me to climb new mountains and reach new heights."

At ACB's 2003 convention in Pittsburgh, National Office staff kindly presented me with a trophy, which still sits in my studio. It's a golden microphone, with "Jonathan Mosen, first ACB Radio Director" written on it.

My final show, The Exploding Goodbye, aired at 0 UTC on 20 July 2003. I was determined that it should be a celebration, although with all the tributes flowing in, I must confess it did feel a bit like attending my own funeral. It was a big party though. So much so that all our capacity was maxed out, and magical Matt Campbell had to increase the maximum listener count on the server to accommodate everyone. It was lovely having so many familiar names getting in touch.

Geoff Shang had flown over from Australia to co-host the show with me, and in a fitting act of symmetry, Gary Adler, the friend who was there when I pushed the button to start ACB Radio in 1999, was there to see me push the button to disconnect from ACB Radio's server for the last time.

## Chapter Sixteen: You Have to Stand for Something, or you'll Fall for Anything

And there the story may well have ended. Apart from those in whom I confided, people generally thought I had left ACB Radio for a better gig, and I was happy to leave them to think that. I had no desire to insert myself into the turmoil I was sure was coming.

That changed in mid-October, when I learned of the resignation of Executive Director Charlie Crawford, due to irreconcilable differences with the President. I've seen too many people shrink from doing what's right because that's the easy option. They decide not to rock the boat. They conclude that what's going on doesn't really affect them anyway, so why stick one's neck out.

People who choose the easy option are unlikely ever to have an impact. You have to know what you stand for, and defend it if you need to. That's not to say you should quit over the smallest annoyance, but you have to know what your personal boundaries are, and when they've been crossed.

John F Kennedy said, "the hottest places in hell are reserved for those who, in times of great moral crisis, maintain their neutrality".

Even more important than that, if you feel a friend has been wronged, you stick up for them, just as you hope they would stick up for you if the situation was reversed. Isn't that the true meaning of friendship? In the words of the great Freddie Mercury, "friends will be friends, right to the end".

Charlie did his job well. He's ACB to the bone, and an outstanding communicator. And I felt both obliged and entitled, as someone who was still a paid-up member at large of ACB, to point out what I believed to be the serious constitutional crisis the organisation was facing. So after a lot of thought and discussion with close friends, I wrote a blog post called "The Council In Crisis". In it, I sought to summarise in as matter-of-fact a manner possible why I had chosen to leave, and why I believed wider action was now necessary.

There's no doubt I lost a few friends by divulging the reasons for my resignation, and I was for the first time in my life exposed to racism when people said that someone who wasn't an American had no right to be expressing an opinion about internal ACB matters. I remain to this day fervently of the view that I did what was right. And in the end, I'm the only person that has to live with myself 24/7.

I think Chris felt that too many paid staff were pursuing a political agenda, one which was generally not favourable to him. Coming back to practices of good governance, I agree that staff have to be particularly careful when taking action that might influence who leads the organisation. New Zealand's blindness agency now prohibits employees from being Board members. So there was a legitimate debate to be had about appropriate boundaries within ACB. Since ACB is a political organisation, it's likely that most blind people who work there are attracted to doing so because they are political people. So if there are to be any guidelines, they need to be along the lines drawn up for people who hold government jobs who are also politically active. Sadly, the climate didn't exist to have that debate calmly or respectfully. ACB had become factionalised, with little trust between the key players.

After Charlie's resignation, long-serving Board member Dawn Christensen resigned, as did First Vice President Steve Speicher. Finally, Penny Reeder, editor of the Braille Forum, was left with no feasible alternative but to resign as well.

They were very difficult times, resulting in the loss of immense institutional knowledge, and enthusiasm among the wider membership.

That said, a no confidence motion against Chris failed in 2004, and he completed three full terms as President.

## Conclusion

All these years on, when I think of ACB Radio now, I do so with an immense sense of accomplishment, pride, fondness, and gratitude. There were so many factors that had to happen in a certain way, at just the right time, for me to have taken up the role. If Paul Edwards hadn't visited when he did, if I hadn't resigned from my previous position when I did, if I hadn't started dabbling in Internet broadcasting when I did...things would most likely have gone in a different direction. The fact that I got to set up and direct this amazing project through its formative stages is an honour and a privilege.

I'm grateful for all the talented, committed people I got to know and work with as we built this very special service.

I'm grateful that for so many people, ACB Radio became a source of information, entertainment and companionship.

I'm grateful that maintaining high standards of journalistic integrity, ACB Radio covered and investigated the big blindness political stories of the day. In my view, our community needs fearless, quality, investigative media.

I'm grateful that we created a forum that was ours – ours as blind people. A forum where we could be informed and entertained by our peers, where we could share tips on everything from cool appliances in the kitchen to cool technology in the office.

I'm grateful that ACB Radio was a source of opportunity, and a means of building confidence, for so many. Some of our presenters found it difficult to leave home. Others had been seeking to find work for years. Others participated because they wanted to give something back to the community. ACB Radio made it possible for someone with a PC in a bedroom to become heard all over the world, and it inspired many similar projects.

At the ACB convention in 2001, I was honoured to be presented with the Vernon Henley Media Award for positive portrayal of blind people in the media. When I gave my acceptance speech, I said I was accepting the award on behalf of everyone who contributed in any way to ACB Radio. Because it was the many voices and skills of people from around the world who made it so very special.

And so, as my narrative comes to a close, my last word is to those folks who made it happen. To the leadership of ACB who saw the possibilities of Internet broadcasting at such an early stage, to everyone who volunteered and gave so much time and talent, what can I say except thank you. Take a bow. In the words of my favourite Blind Line guest, I wouldn't have missed it for the world.