

Triple J is a rare beast, an exemplar for economic policy

Written by The Conversation

It's a common refrain among the "[dry](#)s" in any government that arts and cultural policy should set its course by the lights of economic policy, usually competition, growth, and innovation policy. Sometimes this is called "neoliberalism", intended to rally those who don't like cost-benefit analyses.

Sometimes it is called "[creative industries](#)", which was the UK's New Labour rebranding of the cultural sector so that it might pass these cost-benefit tests.

But sometimes, more rarely, the argument can run the other way, and arts and cultural policy can be an exemplar for economic policy. I want to argue that the ABC youth radio program Triple J, which turns 40 today, is indeed such a rare beast.

Public broadcasting is usually justified by appeal to the [economics of market failure](#), which in this case means some combination of commercial non-viability combined with what economists call "positive externalities", which in the case of radio usually refers to regional concerns and local content.

Cathy Hope [gives a good account](#) of the origins and significance of Triple J on The Conversation, emphasising that what was really going on at Double J (what would later become Triple J) was a lot of experimentation, not just of music content, but of formats and themes.

What is going on here is something a bit different from the standard government-filling-in-where-the-private-sector-fails type of argument. That works to explain public broadcasting of regional sports, or indigenous language programming, but it doesn't explain Triple J. Instead, what Double J was providing, and Triple-J continues to provide, is a peculiar sort of public good, namely: information discovery.

Harvard economists [Dani Rodrik and Ricardo Hausmann](#) have written about this in relation to entrepreneurship and economic development, arguing the problem that entrepreneurs face is acquiring information about economic opportunities.

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(I've written about this with colleagues Hasan Bakhshi and Alan Freeman [here](#) , and in a previous column [here](#) .)

By trying new things, entrepreneurs generate a public good for other entrepreneurs about whether there really is an opportunity in whatever thing they are doing. That means the first entrepreneur bears the cost of figuring out whether there really is an entrepreneurial opportunity or not. In equilibrium, as we economists like to say, there will be too little entrepreneurial discovery of new ideas, and consequently too little subsequent economic growth and development. Effective economic policy will seek to underwrite that first entrepreneur.

Triple J – 40 years ago today – was that first entrepreneur, working as a public good, for the benefit of the rest of the music industry, who could then subsequently adopt (and profit from) all the good ideas it discovered.

So long as Triple J keeps moving forward, continually searching that frontier, continually taking risks and reporting its findings, and not seeking to own its audience as it goes, all the while avoiding capture by internal vested interests, then it is in effect a music and radio discovery machine with spillover benefits for the rest of Australia's music ecology, including especially the commercial radio and media market.

So happy 40th birthday Triple J, may you keep doing what you do so well: taking risks and discovering new things that we all might like. And may you always resist the temptation to hold on to the good things you find, but allow them to move freely onto the wider richer plains of the market.

Jason Potts does not work for, consult to, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has no relevant affiliations.

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