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The Hon Bronwyn Bishop MP
Chairman
House of Representatives Standing Committee on Communications and the Arts
PO BOX 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Chairman

Thank you for your letter of 3 December 2015. The ACT Government welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the House of Representatives Standing Committee Inquiry into broadcasting, online content and live production to rural and regional Australia.

The importance of local media to our regions

The ACT Government is an ardent champion of regional and rural broadcasting and production. Local production of all types of media, with strong and diverse local content, is an important mechanism for community identity and cohesion. The capacity for a diverse range of voices to speak into and out from their communities is also a lynchpin of our modern democracy. As important as broadcasting, online content and live and local production are to all Australians, the power and significance of local media content and production to rural and regional communities cannot be understated.

The circumstances of the ACT are unique among Australia's jurisdictions. It is the seat of national government, as well as a growing city which services its own community and provides economic, social, and cultural services for the Canberra Region. The ACT's role as a regional centre for South East NSW continues to strengthen through engagement with the NSW Government on regional collaboration and the Canberra Region Joint Organisation (CBRJO). The ACT is an active participant in and provides an important dynamic to the surrounding region's activities.

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In the Canberra Region, local and live production of broadcasting and online content, primarily by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, provides a significant and highly valued link between our communities and to the nation and the world. As a regional centre, the ACT is aware of some of the challenges that regional communities face. Even in a region with the nation's capital at its heart, the digital divide between rural and urban communities is a persistent and significant challenge.

Commercial, public and community broadcasting provide a diversity of news, information, cultural content and entertainment and a platform for a multiplicity of views, opinions and perspectives.

I note that there are a number of proposed federal legislative changes currently being debated that relate to the terms of this Inquiry. I am a strong supporter of deregulation where possible and appropriate, especially in fields where technological change has overtaken legislative frameworks. However, recent commentary by the federal Ministers on the proposed reforms of the media sector raises some concerning prospects, particularly if the process of deregulating the business of media results in a decline in the representation of the voices for rural and regional communities in our national media. The "reach" and "two-out-three" media ownership laws stipulated in current legislation are important safeguards to ensure that the important social and cultural role that media plays in our society is appropriately balanced against business and commercial imperatives. The ACT Government is opposed to watering down these provisions. A diversity of voices in regional and rural broadcasting and production should be preserved and supported.

The ACT Government has in the recent past strongly lobbied against the exit of key commercial media providers from the Canberra Region, and we have felt the decline in representation that followed as a consequence. Regions like ours should be protected from further loss of representation. This Inquiry provides a valuable opportunity for the Committee to unambiguously affirm the importance of broadcasting and local content to rural and regional communities, to call for greater support of regional and rural broadcasting and to argue against any moves that threaten the needs of regional and rural Australia.

Further, my Government is currently preparing comments on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation Amendment (Rural and Regional Advocacy) Bill 2015. This will provide another opportunity for my Government to champion strong and diverse regional representation in broadcast and online media.

The role of local media in Emergency Services

The tragic events of the 2003 ACT bushfires demonstrated the important role that local media plays in emergency communication to the public. Public safety in an emergency demands the provision of timely, accurate and consistent information to the community and the media has a critical role in disseminating this information, advice and warnings.

In the event of an emergency situation the ACT Emergency Services Agency (ESA) provides emergency information, advice and warnings to the community in a number of ways. This includes through local ACT media outlets, the ACT ESA website and social media.

The role of local media in these safety processes – which impact the ACT and the broader Canberra region – is critical. To ensure the timely and accurate dissemination of emergency information and warnings 24 hours a day, seven days a week, the ACT ESA has Memoranda of Understanding in place with all local ACT electronic media outlets. In the ACT there is ongoing liaison with local media to train journalists in basic bushfire awareness as well as offering the provision of refresher training and familiarity with the media facilities at the ACT ESA Headquarters.

Local media outlets also provide significant ongoing support to emergency services in the delivery of community education, awareness programs and messaging to assist the community in preparing for emergencies.

Broadcasting, local content and the arts

The ACT Government recognises the importance of broadcasting, online content and live production in enabling communities to learn, work, engage, connect and access services. These services are essential for building a creative, innovative and diverse economy.

Community broadcasters provide a high level of unique local content, a diverse mix of cultural and specialist programs, educational, music, Indigenous, print handicapped, youth, seniors, religious and ethnic language and multicultural services.

For example, Canberra's Radio 1RPH is a volunteer run broadcast station that serves the ACT and surrounding areas of NSW including Queanbeyan, Yass and Michelago, and provides online streaming. The broadcaster provides news and other information for people who are print handicapped, with newspapers, magazines, books, and other printed material read to air.

Canberra based community broadcaster Artsound FM provides on-air and online services and is a community-focussed arts radio organisation. Artsound is recognised as an integral part of Canberra's cultural community with its broad coverage of music, literature, theatre, film, spoken word, art exhibitions and local concerts.

More broadly, regional broadcasting and production facilities provide an essential avenue for regional, rural and remote artists to produce, develop and show their work to a wider audience, as well as developing their practice as an artist. Without these facilities, many regional artists would be forced to move to larger urban centres in order to continue their artistic practice. This would disadvantage artists and the regional and rural communities from which they come.

Such services enhance cultural inclusion opportunities and, with numerous studies confirming the significance of the arts and cultural sector as a contributor to economic and community wellbeing, the ACT Government strongly encourages the continued support of a

diversity of broadcasting services, which facilitate local content for broadcast, online and live production.

Local content and media coverage of local issues and those important to our regional communities are vital parts of fostering and supporting our identity and our voice as a community, city and region. Thank you for the opportunity to provide input into this important inquiry.

Yours sincerely

Andrew Barr MLA
Chief Minister

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