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Hamilton NSW 2303

The Honourable Bronwyn Bishop MP
Chairman
Standing Committee on Communications and the Arts,
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Ms Bishop,

Submission to the Inquiry into broadcasting, online content and live production to rural and regional Australia

This submission is based upon my research on regional radio in Australia. While my research did focus on radio, the ideas presented in this submission can be extrapolated to include other media in regional Australia.

The importance of public and commercial broadcasting in regional areas of Australia cannot be understated as it creates a sense of identity, and belonging to their community. Local media connects regional communities and provides those communities an identity that is difficult to achieve under a centralised service.

Since deregulation of broadcasting in 1992, we have seen an increase in the centralised (networked) operations of print, radio and television resulting in a reduction of local content in a number of areas. This reduction of local content is not only seen in newsrooms around the country but also in a loss of local presenters. As networking has increased, the connectedness between the broadcaster and the licence area has diminished. Centralised broadcasting cannot discuss in detail the issues that are pertinent to individual areas. Towns and cities in regional Australia have their own identities and access to this identity can only be garnered from living within the community. As many programme-makers reside in the licence area, they are able to connect with their communities. As such, regional media should take advantage of this as access to, and use of, this local knowledge can have an effect on a broadcast, content and the audience.

As is often the case, forgotten in the decision making process at a legislative and programming level, are the communities that make up the audience of regional media in Australia. What happens when the needs of the community, those who form part of the sociocultural structures the broadcasting industry works within are ignored, or at best, misconstrued? For an answer to this question it is necessary to look at broadcast media. It is necessary to consider the place broadcasting holds in the media landscape since commercial media are regulated not just externally, but also internally, and adapt not only to communities they engage with but also, importantly, to the needs and wants of owners, advertisers, shareholders and regulators. In their 2007 *Local Content Levels Investigation Report*, the Australian Communications and Media Authority recognised the complexity of formulating media policy and deriving a suitable conception of the audience for regional commercial radio stating that 'a "one-size-fits-all" approach may also fail to accommodate the wide ranging interests and needs of the regional communities they serve' (p. 10).

An issue facing broadcasters and regulators is how they can satisfy the needs and wants of the audience, which may not all be located in the same spatial region. As a result of deregulation, it can be argued that the rise of networking in regional areas could see community radio stations become the new 'local' station. This is not to say that community stations should replace commercial radio or the ABC, rather, that regional media as a whole

is important as it reflects the identity and culture of a region through the interactions between the broadcaster and their audience. Regardless of the interaction that takes place between the audience and presenter, programme-makers and licensees persist in objectifying the audience as some unseen entity that is only of consequence during survey periods. Treating the audience as a commodity in the formulation of media policy runs the risk of alienating the audience and dissipating any sense of community.

As such, it can be also argued that while deregulation was a determinant in the decentralisation of programmes at a regional level, it also led to an increase in diversity in regional areas. Regional areas now receive a diverse range of news and relevant information from mediums such as television, print and the Internet. Regional licence areas have also benefited from an increase in the number of radio licences. Prior to deregulation in 1992 there was only one commercial radio station per regional licence area and one television station per region. Today, regional areas have two commercial radio stations with some areas having three to four commercial radio stations from which to listen and three commercial television stations. We must also add the ABC and community broadcasters to these numbers. Although some may argue that two of the radio stations are owned by the same entity, but with each station targeting a different demographic, they ostensibly provide more diversity than the pre-deregulation era. However, incorporating regional media into the same discourses used to justify changes in metropolitan media ignores the separate issues faced by regional broadcasters, such as differing revenue streams or the costs associated with producing quality local programming seven days per week. As such, the notion of diversity cannot be simply conflated with the number of licences issued or variety of ownership.

Added to this is the contention that the boundaries of place are no longer limited to our immediate locale, rather, the boundaries of our existence have been extended and enhanced by technology. Access to radio and television through a computer, smartphone or other portable device provides access to those that have connections with a licence area, but who may also live outside of that area.

Overall, my research found that while regional audiences were accepting of centralised broadcasting, local media was very important to them. It was their way of connecting with others in their community and a source of information of events in their community. Commercial and public broadcasters have an important role in regional Australia, and the services they provide should be complemented, rather than overtaken by other forms of media. Further changes to broadcasting legislation will not improve local production as has been suggested by those wanting changes to media ownership laws. Yes, the Internet has changed the media landscape and how the audience accesses entertainment and information, but we need to reassess whether changes to legislation will improve a broadcasters position. Without this reassessment we neglect the importance of local media to regional Australians.

Yours Sincerely

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