

12 January, 2018

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Submission to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation Amendment (Rural and Regional Measures) Bill 2017

Dear Secretary,

I am delighted to make a submission to the abovementioned bill. If the bill passes I believe it will help to ensure a more equitable ABC for all.

I live in Alice Springs, which is classified as a regional area in the Bill's proposed definition. I work throughout central Australia in my role as a Bush Chaplain / Patrol Minister for Frontier Services and the Uniting Church in Australia Northern Synod. In my role I serve and support remote Australians who often feel left on the fringes when it comes to sharing in what the rest of Australia takes for granted. Things like education, internet and phone services, economical flights, etc.

Some may say that the existing policies and procedures of the ABC already serve to give voice to those in regional areas, and that the ABC does indeed serve regional and remote areas very well. But do they do enough?

Voices from regional and remote areas will always inevitably be weaker and harder to hear in the cacophony of "me too"'s. Board members and directors are more easily sourced from the larger pools of high population centres. Listener numbers and content statistics are enticing to bean-counters. Feedback channels from regional and remote areas are hampered by distance and problems in telecommunication infrastructure. The ABC is not immune from succumbing to these pulls and pressures, despite its Charter to "provide comprehensive broadcasting services".

The weaker voice of regional Australia can't be better illustrated than with the shutdown of ABC shortwave broadcasts last year. The ABC Board made the decision off their own backs, and their main considerations seemed to be the expansion of the DAB network (which is an unsuitable alternative to shortwave radio for the large expanses of remote Australia) and the money story. The technical alternatives like Digital Radio Mondiale (DRM) weren't considered. Those using the service didn't know anything about it until the decision was already made. And then, when they tried to make their voices heard, they were ignored.

Commercial broadcasters do quite a good job of covering larger population centres – the areas which are more commercially viable. Commercial providers may have more biases than a state-owned broadcaster, but there is enough diversity of voices that the overall picture has some balance. The reality is, people in the larger population centres (the areas the Bill will define as “metropolitan” as well as many of the larger “regional” population centres) have a glut of choice when it comes to TV, radio and web content. In my view it is the ABC’s responsibility, as the state-owned broadcaster, to return some of the balance of the broadcasting industry back to smaller regional and remote areas. In the smaller population areas equity of access does not easily happen through commercial channels, so it falls naturally to the state-owned broadcaster to fulfil that function. Without it, the smaller population regional areas of Australia (which are many) will continue to fall behind the metropolitan areas.

I believe the changes the Bill proposes will help to nudge the ABC more firmly into this role of “filling the gaps”. At the moment I think the ABC is too preoccupied with competing with the commercial broadcasters, and are overlooking the obvious needs and gaps left by said broadcasters. I think the change in focus of the ABC toward a more regional outlook will be beneficial to both the ABC and the Australian populace.

I do however think that remote Australians are still at risk of being left out as the Bill currently stands. The Bill’s definition of “regional” is fairly broad and encompasses significant urban areas as well as remote areas. It may be better to change the categorisation to a three-fold “metropolitan”, “regional (or rural)” and “remote”.

In this configuration, two Board members would have to have significant ties to non-metropolitan areas. Members of the Regional Advisory Council would have to reside in non-metropolitan areas, and a certain proportion of them would have to reside in remote areas.

Another alternative is to retain the two-fold categorisation but have the first as “urban” defined as Greater Capital City Statistical Areas AND Significant Urban Areas, and “regional (or remote)” as the rest of Australia. In this configuration, two board member would have to have significant ties to non-“urban” areas. Members of the Regional Advisory Council would have to either have strong ties to non-“urban” areas or reside in a non-“urban” area. There would be a mandatory proportion of the Regional Advisory Council residing in non-“urban” regions too.

Another alternative is to categorise according to the Australian Tax Office offset zones for Remote Areas. Those in Zones A and B could be considered “remote” and the rest of Australia is “metro and regional”. Under this configuration, two Board members would

have to have significant ties to remote regions. Members of the Regional Advisory Council would have to reside in “remote” areas.

I believe one of these alternate set of definitions and configurations of Board/Council members would better serve remote Australians.

An example might be helpful of how I could see the ABC taking the lead in regional areas and effecting equitable change. Digital Radio Mondiale under 30 Megahertz (DRM30) is an international digital radio standard that utilises shortwave to send the signal thousands of kilometres. Submissions to the government by the ABC, SBS, Broadcast Australia and others over the years have earmarked DRM30 as the most appropriate technology to cover the vast expanses of regional Australia with radio. The DRM standard can also be used at higher frequencies to provide coverage similar to AM radio, but with all the benefits of a digital medium.

Community radio stations and smaller commercial stations in regional areas around Australia could benefit greatly from DRM for several reasons. Firstly, they could expand their coverage areas. Secondly, it gives them an avenue to transition to a digital medium with all the benefits of that. The main issue though, is who will be brave enough to introduce the standard to Australia.¹ To receive the DRM signal consumers will need to purchase a new DRM-capable handset. They are unlikely to do this just for a single local radio station. Commercial radio stations in metropolitan areas have put their eggs in the basket of DAB, which is another digital standard with a small coverage area similar to FM radio. This suits their market in densely populated areas, so they have no real need to explore DRM.

If the ABC were to start transmissions using the DRM standard they would spark an industry-wide change. A single transmitter in the geographical centre of Australia could cover Australia with a strong digital signal. That means no drop-outs between towns and on long highway trips in the outback. Even city-dwellers could tune in. The ABC could also phase out their local AM network and replace it with DRM. All of a sudden buying a DRM-capable radio becomes a lot more tempting, especially for those in remote areas where DRM will be their only listening option when they are not at home with access to internet through wifi.

As the demand for DRM receivers grows, community and commercial radio stations in regional areas will jump on the bandwagon. This in turn will spike demand for DRM receivers, and a larger selection will become available as manufacturers rise to the challenge. Car manufacturers will also begin importing their DRM-capable cars to Australia.

¹ India is currently rolling out a national DRM network, and other countries also have DRM radio stations. The ACMA has reserved frequencies specifically for the introduction of DRM radio in Australia.

Even commercial stations in metropolitan areas will have a viable alternative to DAB. The eventual outcome will be that Australian radio will transition to fully-digital with a mix of DAB and DRM.

At the moment, however, the ABC seems to be taking its cues from commercial broadcasters. In terms of radio this means metropolitan commercial radio stations. Indeed, a large percentage of the Australian population can eventually be reached through the DAB radio standard, but it will never be able to cover the vast expanses of regional Australia, or even the hour-long drive between towns. Perhaps this Bill will cause the ABC to take pause and reconsider its purpose and strategy. It would be great to see the ABC take initiative in technology that will benefit regional Australia, and not just focus on making their content stand out.

A few months after the termination of shortwave radio in Central Australia, the ABC announced a community forum would take place in Alice Springs for people to attend to voice their concerns and hear what the ABC was up to. Most of the ABC Board were present. We locals had high hopes that the ABC would finally hear our voices and see sense regarding shortwave radio. It was not so.

After the event as people were having informal conversations, I overheard an ABC board member saying to someone else associated with the ABC (perhaps another board member, I am not sure) something along the lines of "That went pretty well! The locals who came feel like they've been heard, and we got to tell them what we're doing for them!" Predictably, nothing came of our pleas for shortwave to be resumed.

Guess what, ABC? We don't want to be placated. We don't want to just "feel" heard. We want to actually BE heard. And understood. We want a broadcaster who can take our side. We want a broadcaster who will go where the commercial broadcasters can't or don't want to go. We want a broadcaster who decides to spend more money and more resources on us regional Australians because it is right and fair and equitable to do so. We want a broadcaster who will counter-balance the commercial concerns of other outlets, not one who tags along and has the same values as them.

I use the word "equitable" very intentionally. I believe the proposed Bill is capable of restoring some of the geographical and regional balance to the ABC. It sends a strong message to the ABC board that the government and the people of Australia are not happy for the ABC to solely focus on the numbers game and pander to majority Australians in terms of geographical location. It would be further improved with a better definition than the proposed "metropolitan" and "regional", as discussed above.

One other area of the proposed Bill concerns me. Item number 8 proposes: “If the Board decides that the members of the Regional Advisory Council should be remunerated...”. It is my opinion that the Regional Advisory Council is significant enough to require mandatory remuneration, rather than leaving this decision up to the Board. This, I believe, will cause the Board to take more notice of the advice given by the Regional Advisory Council. I believe it would also assist in ensuring the new Council is not just a “puppet” council filled with people who don’t have the time or resources to take a proper look at the ABC’s regional business.

All the best with the passing and introduction of this important bill. I am available to discuss any of the above in further detail if you so desire.

Regards,
Benjamin Quilliam