

Submission 19

Senator Helen Coonan,
Australian Government Minister for Communications,
The Standing Committee on Communications, Information Technology and the Arts,
House of Representatives,
Parliament House,
Canberra ACT 2600

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The Honorable Senator Helen Coonan,

The following document is in response to the inquiry into the "Government Inquiry into Supporting Community Broadcasters.

Firstly I would like to provide a brief outline of the services provided by the National Indigenous Radio Service and the National Indigenous News Service.

The National Indigenous Radio Service Limited (NIRS) is a National service provided from a hub station residing in Brisbane. It primarily provides a bed program to Indigenous media organisations that don't have the staffing or capital requirements to provide 24-hour high quality broadcasting to their audience. NIRS supplies high quality entertainment and important information to all members who then retransmit the service when relevant.

At one end of this scale NIRS enables aspirant and remote area broadcasters to provide relevant Indigenous broadcasting 24 hours a day to their community, with the opportunity to "window" local programming as each community desires.

For broadcasters who meet the licensing and equipment requirements for a full time service, but lack the funds or resources to provide a full 24-hour service, NIRS will enable them to fill any holes with its continuous programming.

For community broadcasters who access airtime through the Community Broadcasting Association of Australia, (CBAA) affiliate stations, NIRS are able to provide these stations an opportunity for additional areas to hear National Indigenous issues, as well as enabling them to boost local airtime.

At the other end of the scale NIRS provides, to fully licensed broadcasters who already broadcast 24-hour programming, access to high quality national current affairs and issues, which would not normally be accessible to these stations free of charge. In

essence these stations have the freedom to cherry pick the appropriate content that is available and re-broadcast it on their local service

NIRS can be and is received by over 100 Broadcasting to Remote Indigenous Broadcasting Services, (RIBS), 50 Indigenous Radio Stations and 40 Community Radio Stations.

NIRS has a unique ability to reach a nationwide Indigenous and community radio audience, with a National audience potential of almost four, (4), million people.

As NIRS is a network relying on retransmission via local stations, we are continuously seeking and gathering statistical information (demographics, population etc.) from these stations, although it is recognised that the affinity between local Aboriginal people and a local Aboriginal media organisation is very strong. As a medium to get a relevant message out to a target audience, NIRS, through its member stations is by far the most effective.

The Australian Indigenous Communications Association (AICA) has been recognised as the peak body for Indigenous Broadcasters around Australia. As a member of AICA it is NIRS's endeavor to promote Indigenous culture and issues and to enhance the credibility and reputation of Indigenous radio broadcasting.

NIRS is not to be seen as an alternative to regional broadcasting, but rather as a supplement. While NIRS can provide high quality relevant programs, especially on a National perspective, it can never provide the service supplied by local broadcasters who know their local audience best. With this in mind, NIRS is importantly a tool for which local broadcasters can tap into and utilise to compliment their existing service.

NIRS is primarily a bed program with a large percentage entertainment content in the form of music. At any specified time (depending on current affairs and information programs) you can access the largest range of indigenous Australian music, both traditional and contemporary, as well as the best in Australian contemporary music. The music philosophy behind the NIRS concentrates solely on Australian content.

Around this music bed are based national programming in areas such as health, education, talkback, special event of Indigenous importance, various governmental department updates, and issues relevant to Indigenous Australians.

Other programming includes regional roundups from all over the country, sporting events and special music and festival events. A monthly program guide is supplied to members for their information.

NIRS programming is made up of existing Indigenous Radio Stations, including;

4AAA, Brisbane, QLD
4K1G, Townville, QLD
4C1M, Cairns, QLD
CAAMA, Alice Springs, NT
Umeewarra Media, Port Augusta, SA
5UV, Adelaide, SA

PAKAM, Broome, WA.
6WR, Kununurra WA

NIRS is also the home to the National Indigenous News Service, (NINS), which is designed to provide a service relevant to all Indigenous Australians from Broome to Bourke to Badu Island. Its aim is to fill a void in the reporting of Indigenous issues by mainstream media, which often focus on negative stories. NINS covers the positives as well as the negatives.

NINS provides Indigenous Australians a voice on issues outside of Indigenous affairs. We recognise that there is a wealth of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander professionals who want to comment on National and international topics.

There are a number of key features to our service:

All our journalists are Aboriginal

They have a solid understanding of historical and contemporary issues impacting Indigenous Australians. They also have a solid understanding of cultural and social protocols.

Indigenous news bulletins

Bulletins run on the hour, Monday to Friday between 6am and 8pm, and are 4:59minutes duration. Content includes regional, state, national, international and sport stories. News is dominated by politics, health, education etc. Every bulletin must engage a majority of Indigenous stories per bulletin.

Our news reflects the happenings and events which impact on our way of life and life-styles

This means issues such as native title, reconciliation, stolen generations and Mabo Day are often given greater prominence over mainstream stories.

Access to the Indigenous broadcasting sector

Several stations have well-equipped newsrooms in operation, such as CAAMA radio in Alice Springs and WAAMA in Perth. A number of other stations have Current Affairs programs, which we can also utilise.

NINS continues to grow from just 2 journalists in 2001, to 3 senior journalists, a cadet and student volunteers in 2006, all our staff contribute to a weekly Current Affairs show.

NIRS is currently fighting for its long-term survival, as many other Indigenous stations across the country, with continuous annual cuts in funding by the Community Broadcasting Foundation, (CBF), NIRS's major funding body. Also the lack of funding by The Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, (DCITA) to fund the National Indigenous News Service also has major ramifications on the service we provide.

Our satellite programming service requires growth and expansion allowing substantial growth.

For NIRS to achieve this we believe AICA needs to recognise NIRS as an active developer and acknowledgement we are assisting the Indigenous radio sector. NIRS does require adequate funding to grow and maintain an efficient and high-class delivery of programming services with expansion to include more Indigenous stations to be integrated on the NIRS grid allowing more Indigenous stations to provide direct programmes directly to the satellite via tie lines or ISDN.

You may not be aware that the CBF have over several years reduced our core funding. This financial year the CBF decided to de fund NIRS depriving the organisation of funds for a Manager. We are currently supporting this position from our self-generated income generated through the sale of sponsorship announcements on behalf of Indigenous stations across the country. The bulk of the income derived by sponsorship is distributed to our network stations, however this is not a consistent stream of income and extremely unpredictable and cannot be guaranteed at any certain level year by year.

NINS is one of the most comprehensive Indigenous news services in Australia, beamed to all Indigenous stations throughout the country, yet DCITA has failed to recognise the need for any substantial or sufficient growth within the service keeping funding levels at a “status quo” over the past five, (5) years leaving NIRS in a unstable financial position.

We believe the continuous funding cuts or stagnant approach to funding by funding bodies has dealt a heavy blow to the sector with an enormous loss of Indigenous employment, a “forced” approach for Indigenous stations to chase mainstream dollars in turn creating a slight to huge deviation to formats, Indigenous content and deviating from the reason Indigenous radio was established.

There appears to be criticism among funding bodies regarding choices made by individual Indigenous radio stations and their chosen formats. NIRS believes each station has a right and duty to ensure the format of their station reflects the need of their members and audience, though this does not constitute a deviation from the cause of the sector but to develop Indigenous radio into a professional industry not only preaching to the converted but widening the scope as to attract non-Indigenous people to be able to not only be entertained but educated.

All Indigenous radio stations, including our RIBS units, fight constantly and annually against a smaller and smaller funding bucket and each year and are made to make internal sacrifices which include loss of staff, the inability to replace outdated equipment and rely on begging for help from other funding sources which are very limited and in some cases out of reach for our sector. NIRS and our Indigenous radio stations do not even receive the ordinary annual CPI increases and as a consequence the staff/or the service suffer.

NIRS is concerned regarding what has been perceived as an attempt to move Indigenous radio into a “mainstream” system. Indigenous media has been forced to deal with extreme and additional Government bureaucracy through funding bodies, tougher and more stringent terms and conditions, and increased scrutiny than ever before leaving stations with a massive burden. We believe this is a lack of recognition of Indigenous peoples special needs, which is the whole purpose of our existence as Indigenous media.

Due to funding issues fewer stations are unable to engage consultants for technical advice or financial matters placing the somewhat specialised positions within some organisations out of reach and in some case to the detriment of that organisation.

NIRS has found Indigenous stations find themselves in difficulties including financial and technical which can be attributed as a direct result of a “deviation” of original plans designed for Indigenous radio, reverting back to the issue of funding.

Indigenous stations are no longer being recognised by the government and their agents as Indigenous radio by the Australian Broadcasting Authority, (ABA) who have “mainstreamed” Indigenous radio into the wider category known as the “Community” radio sector and indications show this trend is set to continue despite ongoing disagreement from the Indigenous radio sector.

Public broadcasters were issued classes of licenses:

2SER for example were provided an 'E' class license; there were 'S' class licenses and so on. It is the belief of NIRS this should be reinstated and allows Indigenous radio a class type license shielding the sector from being grouped under the one umbrella.

Classing Indigenous radio under a 'C' class category, under the identity Community radio, the identity of the Indigenous radio sector is being lost and again shows a deviation to the reason and purpose for the being of Indigenous radio.

NIRS requests the committee investigate the possibility of Indigenous radio licenses be recognised under a different class: e.g. similar to ABT days where stations were recognised and provided with separate classes of licenses rather than being under the current umbrella of 'C' class community license,

NIRS is aware of the have and have not's within the sector, stations whom receive ample funding and stations who barely receive enough funding and are battling to make it through each financial year the extent where many RIBS receive no operational funding at all.

NIRS finds some funding bodies inflict terms and conditions on stations that reflect detachment rather than an empowering affect making detrimental impacts, especially in this financial year in relation to the demand for a review on Indigenous radio sector membership and the pressure to change inbuilt formats of stations that have been decided by members and elected directors of individual stations.

Limited funding to the Indigenous radio sector has stunted the ability for stations to plan for the future. How can an organisation plan for the next five, (5) years if it can only rely on year-to-year funding, which in most cases is stagnating and at worst diminishing.

How can stations be forced to follow programming guidelines as dictated by some funding bodies when the funding supplied by those funding bodies barely meet the needs of the operations of that organisation, in turn forcing the Indigenous radio station to seek other sources of income, mainly self generated, by producing programmes that are pleasing not only to there target audience but also a wider audience for the commercial appeal.

The independence and diversity of Indigenous radio is at risk if the Government and other funding bodies do not increase funding levels and allow Indigenous radio to aim for self-determination.

Programmes, training, staffing levels, improving Indigenous career prospects are and will continue to be compromised under the current system being employed, Indigenous men and women are being employed and largely dependant on CDEP rather than being offered fulltime positions. There can be no growth in Indigenous radio without the growth of funding buckets and a better understanding of Indigenous radio and the employment of Indigenous men and women.

NIRS is devastated at the number of Indigenous men and women who have lost their employment due to the lack of constant or trickling funds over the years which we believe continues to remove the empowerment to those stations.

The Indigenous radio sector sits in “limbo” regarding its future.

Where are we being taken?

Who are creating agenda's being enforced and why are so many Indigenous radio stations suffering?

The issue of technology and Indigenous radio will require intense thought and consultation.

The digital era is here and in most cases Indigenous stations still remain without basic needs when it comes to broadcasting equipment.

The powers that be need to be prepared for an onslaught of applications from the Indigenous radio sector for the need to switch to digital format, again will this be seen as a priority, as we have witnessed with the Indigenous radio sectors annual operating and wage funding.

NIRS is keen to take a pro-active approach and be heavily involved in any formation of a committee or forum that seeks to improve the sector, its future and direction. The Indigenous radio sector is an essential service providing a crucial communication platform to our communities and this sector needs to be recognised and appropriately resourced to deliver this vital service on behalf of its communities, the government and Australia as a whole.

Major points of concern raised in our submission:

- NIRS believes we are able to be more active and assist in the development and co ordination of our network. Ensuring such issues as our network is technically compatible in relation to equipment and assist AICA in building stronger Indigenous radio sector:
- The issue of consistent funding needs to be addressed so the Indigenous radio sector can be able to plan and determine long term goals and self determination, create more employment for Indigenous peoples and be able to plan for the future rather than live year by year,

- NIRS requests the committee investigate the possibility of Indigenous radio licenses be recognised under a different class: e.g. similar to ABT days where stations were recognised and provided with separate classes of licenses rather than being under the current umbrella of 'C' class community licenses,
- We request that the committee investigate internal issues that directly affect day to day operations directly caused by inconsistencies in annual funding within Indigenous radio,
- Digital technology is a move which Indigenous radio is needing capital funding to achieve, though achieving digital technology a review is required of Indigenous stations who barely have the basics for broadcasting.

Tiga Bayles
Chairman
National Indigenous Radio Service