Australian Government

Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs

COMMUNITY BROADCASTING INQUIRY

DEPARTMENT OF IMMIGRATION AND MULTICULTURAL AFFAIRS SUBMISSION

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SUBMISSION TO THE COMMUNITY BROADCASTING INQUIRY

Introduction

Prime responsibility for development and implementation of the Australian Government's settlement and multicultural policies and programmes falls to the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA). DIMA's contribution to the inquiry is from the perspective of the government agency responsible for promoting social cohesion to ensure that cultural diversity is a unifying factor in Australia.

DIMA's Multicultural Affairs Branch facilitates and monitors the implementation of the Australian Government's multicultural affairs policy, with specific reference to the policy statement *Multicultural Australia: United in Diversity (Strategic directions for 2003-2006)*, which updates the *New Agenda for Multicultural Australia* (1999). Following completion of an evaluation, a revised policy will be announced in the coming months. The government's multicultural policy is an integral part of the legislative and policy framework that supports fairness, equitable treatment and justice for all. It contributes to the government's reform agenda, which aims to actively ensure that each member of the Australian community has the opportunity to participate in the life of our community and to experience the benefits and accept the responsibilities that flow from such participation. This reduces the likelihood of community and individual marginalisation that can lead to social isolation, extremism and even acts of violence.

DIMA maintains a nationwide network of community liaison officers who actively engage with representatives of Australia's migrant communities. This submission draws on information obtained from this network.

Reflecting the character of Australia and its cultural diversity

The focus of this submission is largely on the second of the terms of reference: content and programming requirements that reflect the character of Australia and its cultural diversity. This is of particular concern in the current international environment and following incidents such as those in Cronulla and their aftermath, which have contributed to some suspicion and disengagement between people from different communities.

Community broadcasting should reflect the diversity of Australia and democratic Australian values of freedom of speech and religion, respect for others, parliamentary democracy, the rule of law, acceptance and equality.

Community broadcasting in general

The rapidly growing community broadcasting sector has made an important contribution to Australian society. Community broadcasting today is Australia's largest independent media sector. The fact that some 4,000 volunteers are involved in community broadcasting is a testament to the value that the community sees in it. It sets a fine example of community building.

It is important to recognise the contributions over more than 35 years of community broadcasting to building social cohesion in Australia. Because of its cooperative and largely voluntary nature, community broadcasting brings together people from diverse ethnic and other backgrounds and provides a valued means of self-expression and service to many Australians at very little cost to government.

Ethnic community broadcasting

Ethnic community broadcasting is an important sector of community broadcasting which reaches ethnic communities, often in non-English languages.

There are now 106 ethnic community broadcasters. Almost one hundred languages are spoken on their airwaves. They are a valued part of Australian society reflecting its character and diversity. On a largely voluntary basis these broadcasters provide a valuable service to their communities, particularly for those with limited English language skills, that is not provided by mainstream commercial or public broadcasters.

- For example, the Community Broadcasting Foundation recognised Community radio station Stereo 974, located in the western suburbs of Melbourne, for its contribution to a culturally diverse Australia. Stereo 974 broadcasts in nine languages other than English, producing 58 hours of ethnic programming a week, including four hours of ethnic youth programming.

Information isolation

The majority of ethnic communities watch both local and international news. Some community members have access to satellite television, and many watch television programmes on SBS. A recurrent message from many communities is that these non-English services are attractive as they provide more information about their country of origin and world events in their native language. Lack of availability of community broadcasting in their native tongue, particularly for those with limited English ability, can lead to reliance on international media sources overseas for information in competition with Australian views, and increase their isolation from the general community.

In countering this information isolation, community ethnic broadcasting has an important role in building social cohesion through linking Australians to local and national news, perspectives and events through Australia-focused non-English broadcasting. We are not convinced that many, if not most, of the community channels consistently promote and educate these diverse communities about Australian values, such as Parliamentary democracy, freedom of speech and religion, the rule of law, tolerance and equality, including equality of the sexes. A condition of licensing should be a monitored and enforceable response to reinforce and educate these communities about the values and culture of Australia.

Settlement support

Community broadcasting provides a valuable source of information for people settling in Australia. This can include information about services, Australian ways, and local migrant communities' experiences. It also provides a valuable link to existing community networks.

Many newly arrived migrants settle in the outer suburbs of large cities or regional areas because of cheaper housing. However, lack of adequate public transport and lack of public meeting places, together with unfamiliarity with their new surroundings, means that these new arrivals are not only isolated but also disadvantaged in their opportunities to acquire knowledge about available assistance and services.

Information prepared and presented by those with language and cultural expertise can address the needs of their audiences. In addition community broadcasting can reach wider audiences than the narrower target groups eligible for face-to-face settlement service provision.

With the increasing cultural and linguistic diversity of new arrivals in Australia, there is a need to provide broadcasting services in more languages, including for smaller and emerging communities.

Anecdotal information from DIMA-funded Community Settlement Services Scheme (CSSS) workers and community leaders suggests that new arrivals, especially those from small and emerging communities, tend to be isolated from the general community, and to some extent from their own communities. This is particularly the case for many women who, due to their childcare responsibilities and cultural norms, are often isolated in their houses. Community ethnic broadcasting can be a vital means of connection for these people.

Small and emerging communities often have problems with funding. One Sudanese radio service in NSW recently had to close down because it could not raise the small amount of capital required to keep it running (an amount of some $500). Some of these communities are able to broadcast for only one hour per week due to costs. Any scope for additional funding would be advantageous to small and emerging communities where there are clearly greater communication needs outside of the mainstream media outlets.

Contributing to social cohesion

Research has shown that ethnic identity offers greater self-reliance and pride to migrant groups.[1] This leads in turn to greater tolerance and an increase in the identification with the wider community. Through giving and valuing the voice of migrant, cultural and religious communities, ethnic community broadcasting enhances overall social cohesion.

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[1] Berry and Kalin: Some psychological and cultural implications of multiculturalism", report prepared for the Economic Council of Canada, June 1990.

Ethno-specific community broadcasters have considerable potential to promote social cohesion by providing interaction between groups and with the community at large.

- For example, the Spanish-speaking community in NSW has programmes where people from various Spanish speaking backgrounds come together and participate in activities, forums and so on, which builds up common experiences and community.

Given the benefit to overall social cohesion, ethnic broadcasters could be encouraged to be more inclusive in terms of inter-community, inter-faith and inter-cultural programming initiatives. They have the capacity and a responsibility to not only care for their constituencies' immediate concerns, but to link various groups, including youth, women and the elderly of more established communities, to promote social cohesion and emphasise their importance of shared democratic values and participation in broader community life.

There have been concerns that mainstream popular media, particularly talk-back radio, have in some cases contributed to inflaming negative attitudes towards particular communities.[2] Community broadcasting has provided an alternative viewpoint for smaller and marginalised communities, and has provided an important voice in promoting unity in diversity, and social cohesion. This role is significant, given community broadcasters' potential for building bridges between communities and improving community relations, especially in times of stress for community harmony. They can break down prejudice and discrimination, and have a duty not to broadcast material contrary to community standards. Content and programming regulations should support and enunciate principles relating to these responsibilities.

Allocation of community radio licences

The need for transparency and fairness in the allocation of licenses is illustrated by an incident in 2001 in relation to the allocation of three community licenses to serve Sydney by the Australian Broadcasting Authority. The decision to grant one of the licences to a particular Islamic charity was severely criticised as a political decision by a competing body which claimed broader community representation of mainstream Australian Muslims. Other groups were also not supportive of the decision. The licensee did, however, go on to provide successful programming. This case indicates that there are community sensitivities in this area and that there is a need for transparency of decision-making.

New technologies and alternative delivery

For community broadcasting to remain relevant it requires a capacity to adopt new technology and alternative methods of reaching communities to keep up with public and commercial broadcasting technology, including digital, the internet, and access to 'podcasting'.

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[2] Isma – Listen: National consultations on eliminating prejudice against Arab and Muslim Australians, 2001.

Older people from non-English speaking backgrounds can rely increasingly on their native language as they age, so it is also important that they too continue to have access to ethnic language broadcasting technology in a format which they are able to comfortably access.

There is a potential technological divide along language lines. For example, the level of African language support on computers can be fragmented, which makes it difficult to exchange written or web-based information in African languages between different people and organisations. Some cultural groups simply have strong oral traditions. Others, such as refugees, may be illiterate in their own languages. Community broadcasting is valuable in meeting the needs of these people whose language needs are not met at all by written media.

Conclusion

Community broadcasting enables communities to contribute, often on a voluntary basis, to the benefit of their own members. It also benefits the whole society by empowering groups who may risk being marginalised, enhancing information flows and linking together groups and individuals. Community broadcasting contributes significantly to DIMA objectives of supporting successful settlement and encouraging a strong, vibrant and cohesive Australia. The department would welcome any initiatives that result in strengthening the community broadcasting sector and maintaining its relevance to its large audiences and to Australian society as a whole.

Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs
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