

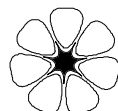


**THE NORTHERN TERRITORY GOVERNMENT**

**SUBMISSION TO**

**HOUSE COMMUNICATIONS COMMITTEE INQUIRY  
INTO THE ADEQUACY OF RADIO SERVICES  
IN NON-METROPOLITAN AUSTRALIA**

**NOVEMBER 2000**



Northern Territory Government

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>1.</b>	<b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1	The Northern Territory Government Submission to the Inquiry .....	1
1.2	The Terms of Reference of the Inquiry.....	1
1.3	Demography of the Northern Territory.....	2
1.4	Strategic Directions .....	3
<b>2.</b>	<b>THE SOCIAL BENEFITS AND INFLUENCE ON THE GENERAL PUBLIC OF RADIO BROADCASTING IN NON-METROPOLITAN AUSTRALIA IN COMPARISON TO OTHER MEDIA SECTORS.....</b>	<b>5</b>
2.1	Social Benefits of Radio Broadcasting .....	5
2.2	Television – Comparison to Radio Media .....	6
2.3	Newspapers – Comparison to Radio Media.....	7
2.4	Observations .....	7
<b>3.</b>	<b>FUTURE TRENDS IN RADIO BROADCASTING, INCLUDING EMPLOYMENT AND CAREER OPPORTUNITIES, IN NON-METROPOLITAN AUSTRALIA.....</b>	<b>11</b>
3.1	Future Trends.....	11
3.2	Certified Broadcasters.....	12
3.3	Training for Broadcasters .....	12
3.4	Technical Expertise .....	12
3.5	Observations .....	13
<b>4.</b>	<b>THE EFFECT ON INDIVIDUALS, FAMILIES AND SMALL BUSINESS IN NON-METROPOLITAN AUSTRALIA OF NETWORKING OF RADIO PROGRAMMING, PARTICULARLY IN RELATION TO LOCAL NEWS SERVICES, SPORT, COMMUNITY SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENTS AND OTHER FORMS OF LOCAL CONTENT .....</b>	<b>14</b>
4.1	Networking .....	14

<b>4.2</b>	<b>Observations .....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>5.</b>	<b>THE POTENTIAL FOR NEW TECHNOLOGIES SUCH AS DIGITAL RADIO TO PROVIDE ENHANCED AND MORE LOCALISED RADIO SERVICES IN METROPOLITAN, REGIONAL AND RURAL AREAS ...</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>5.1</b>	<b>Advanced Technologies.....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>5.2</b>	<b>Enhancement of Service .....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>5.3</b>	<b>Localisation of Radio Services .....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>5.4</b>	<b>Observations .....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>6.</b>	<b>RECOMMENDATIONS.....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>7.</b>	<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....</b>	<b>21</b>



NORTHERN TERRITORY GOVERNMENT SUBMISSION TO  
**HOUSE COMMUNICATIONS COMMITTEE INQUIRY**  
**INTO THE ADEQUACY OF RADIO SERVICES**  
**IN NON-METROPOLITAN AUSTRALIA**  
**NOVEMBER 2000**

---

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 The Northern Territory Government Submission to the Inquiry**

The Northern Territory Government welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Inquiry as it considers that the provision of comprehensive radio services to non-metropolitan areas is critical to the Territory's social, cultural and economic development.

Enquiries regarding the content of the submission should be addressed to:

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### **1.2 The Terms of Reference of the Inquiry**

The House of Representatives Communications Committee shall inquire into and report on the adequacy of radio services in regional and rural Australia and the extent to which there is a need for the Government to take action in relation to the quantity and the quality of radio services in regional and rural Australia, having particular regard to the following:

- the social benefits and influence on the general public of radio broadcasting in non-metropolitan Australia in comparison to other media sectors;
- future trends in radio broadcasting, including employment and career opportunities, in non-metropolitan Australia;
- the effect on individuals, families and small business in non-metropolitan Australia of networking of radio programming, particularly in relation to local news services, sport, community service announcements and other forms of local content; and
- the potential for new technologies such as digital radio to provide enhanced and more localised radio services in metropolitan, regional and rural areas.



NORTHERN TERRITORY GOVERNMENT SUBMISSION TO  
**HOUSE COMMUNICATIONS COMMITTEE INQUIRY**  
**INTO THE ADEQUACY OF RADIO SERVICES**  
**IN NON-METROPOLITAN AUSTRALIA**  
**NOVEMBER 2000**

---

---

The closing date for submissions to the inquiry was 27 October 2000, however an extension was granted until 30 November 2000 to allow time for passage through the Northern Territory Government processes.

### **1.3 Demography of the Northern Territory**

The Northern Territory occupies approximately 16.7% of Australia's landmass yet accounts for only 1% of the national population. In 1999 there were 192,882 people living in the Northern Territory, but this figure masks a large itinerant population and high population turnover. At 1,360,200 km<sup>2</sup> it has a population density of only 0.1 persons/km<sup>2</sup>. This is lower than any other State or Territory and is well below the national density of 2.4 persons/km<sup>2</sup>. It is also very low compared to the population density of the ASEAN region immediately to the north of 131.3 persons/km<sup>2</sup>.

The Territory's population is concentrated in the urban centres, with Darwin and its surrounding areas accounting for over half (52.6%) of the total Territory population. Alice Springs accounts for a further 13.7% with the other major centres accounting for 9.2%.

This means that just under a quarter (24.5%) of the Northern Territory's population live in very remote areas.

A recent study by the University of Adelaide titled: *Measuring Remoteness: Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia* identified five categories, ranging from highly accessible to very remote.

The study concluded that no area in the Northern Territory was considered to be:

**Highly Accessible** No restrictions on accessibility of goods, services and opportunities for social interaction.

The CBD and suburbs of Darwin are:

**Accessible** Some restrictions on accessibility of some goods, services and opportunities for social interaction.

The rest of Greater Darwin is classified as:

**Moderately Accessible** Significantly restricted accessibility of goods, services and opportunities for social interaction.





NORTHERN TERRITORY GOVERNMENT SUBMISSION TO  
**HOUSE COMMUNICATIONS COMMITTEE INQUIRY**  
**INTO THE ADEQUACY OF RADIO SERVICES**  
**IN NON-METROPOLITAN AUSTRALIA**  
**NOVEMBER 2000**

---

---

Access to radio broadcast services plays a vital role in achieving all of these initiatives.

Northern Territory Government assistance to Territorians to access quality broadcasting services is based on encouraging the expansion and range of quality free-to-air broadcasting services across the Territory and the management and monitoring of broadcasting services.

Particular areas of involvement in broadcasting are:

- Black Spots
- Retransmission Sites
- Community Radio
- Digital TV
- Datacasting

The Inquiry has implications for the Northern Territory in the following areas:

- indigenous education and development;
- regional and community development;
- tourism marketing, eg local information about events and road conditions;
- delivery of education;
- information on health and allied health services; and
- provision of emergency services.

NOTE:

The findings of Adelaide University's *Measuring Remoteness: Accessibility/Remoteness Index* indicated that, unlike any other Australian capital city, Darwin had some restrictions to access of goods, services and opportunities for social interaction. We have therefore treated Darwin as a non-metropolitan centre for the purpose of this submission.



NORTHERN TERRITORY GOVERNMENT SUBMISSION TO  
**HOUSE COMMUNICATIONS COMMITTEE INQUIRY  
INTO THE ADEQUACY OF RADIO SERVICES  
IN NON-METROPOLITAN AUSTRALIA**  
NOVEMBER 2000

---

---

**2. THE SOCIAL BENEFITS AND INFLUENCE ON THE GENERAL PUBLIC  
OF RADIO BROADCASTING IN NON-METROPOLITAN AUSTRALIA IN  
COMPARISON TO OTHER MEDIA SECTORS**

**2.1 Social Benefits of Radio Broadcasting**

Radio broadcasting provides all Territorians, many of whom live in remote areas with restricted access to social interaction, with a valuable means of communication and the ability to access vital information. The passage of time and introduction of new technologies has not diminished the demand for this essential and unique community service.

Other media sectors do not provide the same level of connection with their audience and in many instances are less accessible to Territorians. Even in the year 2000 some remote communities do not have access to telephone or television. Radio can bridge some of the inadequacies of this situation. For those who are connected to the telephone network, radio broadcasting can provide a valuable form of social interaction by encouraging talkback, competitions and requests.

Radio presenters are able to change their programming priorities in direct response to readily accessible and contemporaneous audience feedback. This assists in the development of a sense of community as individual listeners gain social benefit from the quasi relationships they form with radio presenters. Access to talkback radio is a beneficial means of making their opinion known to an assured audience and the listener is also assured of a more instantaneous response than writing to the editor or contacting his or her local television station with programming suggestions.

Many Territorians cannot choose their information delivery channel. For some, radio is the only timely and responsive media outlet that services the community and for others in very remote locations it is the only source. Even in Darwin, national newspapers are not available until the afternoon, therefore the ABC and other radio stations are relied upon heavily to provide immediate coverage of news, current affairs, national and international issues.

Apart from news, sport, entertainment, weather, emergency announcements and other essential information, radio is also one of the means by which the Territory Government communicates to the community, by broadcasting Question Time of the Legislative Assembly Sittings through the Territory Network.





NORTHERN TERRITORY GOVERNMENT SUBMISSION TO  
**HOUSE COMMUNICATIONS COMMITTEE INQUIRY  
INTO THE ADEQUACY OF RADIO SERVICES  
IN NON-METROPOLITAN AUSTRALIA**  
**NOVEMBER 2000**

---

---

Comprehensive radio broadcasting creates a valuable connection between all Territorians that would not otherwise exist due to the vast distances between small regional and remote communities. It also connects Territorians to the rest of Australia.

Without diminishing the value of other forms of media, radio broadcasting's strength lies in the fact that it is portable and cheap and requires no intervention or specific attention to receive its message. It can be accessed and assimilated while people are performing other social, recreational or occupational activities. Because it does not require the same level of attention that television and print media demands it is a boon to busy Territorians with competing time pressures.

From a Territory perspective, the primary social benefits of radio broadcasting are that it is immediate, responsive, cheap to produce, cheap to listen to and is audience focused which ideally meets the needs of the Northern Territory's ethnic diversity, small population size and dispersed centres of population.

Of particular benefit to Territorians is the focus that can be placed on cultural and indigenous affairs. Broadcasts provided in Aboriginal and other ethnic languages contribute to the preservation of culture and cultural links as well as building self-esteem for listeners who hear their language on the radio. News presented from an indigenous perspective, enables Aboriginal and Torres Strait voices to be heard. Aboriginal ownership of community radio stations establishes a sense of pride among communities that is unattainable from involvement in other forms of mainstream media.

## **2.2 Television – Comparison to Radio Media**

Despite recent Commonwealth funding to correct black spots in television coverage, coverage is not available in all populated areas in the Northern Territory.

A large proportion of Territorians live in remote areas that are annually subjected to disruptive weather phenomena. Radio is regarded as a more reliable source of information in extreme circumstances, such as the aftermath of floods or cyclones. The Northern Territory experiences a high rate of electrical failure during wet season storms, that regularly interrupts television broadcasts in the northern areas of Northern Territory.

In disaster relief situations, it is easier to re-establish radio broadcasting facilities. Portable emergency generators and transmitters can be kept inside during the period of extreme conditions then quickly erected externally or transported to affected areas after the danger has passed. At such times a battery operated portable radio may be the only broadcast receiver available for



**NORTHERN TERRITORY GOVERNMENT SUBMISSION TO  
HOUSE COMMUNICATIONS COMMITTEE INQUIRY  
INTO THE ADEQUACY OF RADIO SERVICES  
IN NON-METROPOLITAN AUSTRALIA  
NOVEMBER 2000**

---

---

many. Associated with this benefit, is the need to provide conditions where the Territory can attract skilled technicians to the Territory and ensure that they remain in the Territory so they are available to carry out emergency re-establishment when required.

The vast amount of hours spent travelling the long distances between regional centres in motor vehicles elevates the value of radio over television broadcasting for a significant sized audience due to the inability to watch television whilst driving. There is also a significant number of resident and non-resident travellers who require reliable service in off-highway situations which makes the need for border to border coverage, as opposed to length of highway coverage, essential.

### **2.3 Newspapers – Comparison to Radio Media**

In the Northern Territory there are significant obstacles associated with delivering national and regional newspapers to a significant proportion of the population in a timely manner and many local papers are not produced on a daily basis. Therefore the first local, national and international news services people receive each day are via the radio.

Radio broadcasting also has an advantage over the print media in the Northern Territory in areas where there are lower literacy standards and higher incidence of chronic eye diseases that inhibit a person's capacity to read. With radio, people need only be able to hear to participate. Whilst this has implications for ethnic language broadcasts, higher production costs for newspapers with a very small market makes it a less viable alternative to radio broadcasting.

Radio is the perfect media in that it provides motorists with the opportunity to assimilate information whilst driving, something not possible with visual media.

### **2.4 Observations**

Radio broadcasting, regardless of the technology that delivers it, will be a vital part of daily life for a long time to come.

It is imperative that all Territorians have access to the same quality and quantity of services as other Australians as radio broadcasting can be their first or only link to vital information. Ideally continuous border to border radio coverage by at least one major broadcaster would resolve many social, safety and security issues for Territorians living in remote and very remote areas of the Northern Territory.



NORTHERN TERRITORY GOVERNMENT SUBMISSION TO  
**HOUSE COMMUNICATIONS COMMITTEE INQUIRY**  
**INTO THE ADEQUACY OF RADIO SERVICES**  
**IN NON-METROPOLITAN AUSTRALIA**  
**NOVEMBER 2000**

---

---

A significant length of Highway One traverses the Northern Territory, servicing tourism, the transport industry, and Territorians travelling to service towns. In the short term the Northern Territory Government considers it desirable to provide continuous broadcast coverage along the full length of all major highways in the Northern Territory. Many installation and maintenance factors need to be considered when deciding upon the appropriate delivery methods to be utilised to overcome geographically specific situations. Sometimes the preferred option may be cost prohibitive.

The ABC is currently working on providing border to border coverage in the AM band, so by definition this will provide highway coverage. If other stations were also able to provide coverage along the highway there would be a greater chance of ensuring continuous access and choice of transmission. The preference is for a choice of commercial stations to be available, initially along the highways, but ultimately border to border.

The Northern Territory Government requires funding to carry out research to determine the true extent of black spots in radio broadcast transmission areas and to determine where other broadcasters can assist in covering the gaps that exist in existing services.

Radio black spots need to be eradicated. Federal funding of a black spot program similar to that recently granted to the television industry is required to improve the quality and quantity of reception.

Concerns have been raised that there is not enough variety available in radio services. People living in regional, rural and even some remote areas in Australia have similar access as their urban counterparts to a number of commercial television stations as well as the ABC. In comparison, their choice and variety in access to commercial radio stations is limited. Despite its value, community radio meets only a small percentage of the public's need for diversified sources of information and entertainment.

It is our view that all Territorians should have the opportunity for adequate access to the full range of radio broadcasting services; national, community and commercial.

The Territory needs a strong public broadcasting presence and vibrant community radio environment. The diverse and scattered nature of Territory communities demands a wide range of broadcasting services that meet both cultural and ethnic requirements and allow a forum for the dissemination of local content. People from non-English speaking backgrounds should receive the same news and local content through programs in their native language, as should indigenous groups.



**NORTHERN TERRITORY GOVERNMENT SUBMISSION TO  
HOUSE COMMUNICATIONS COMMITTEE INQUIRY  
INTO THE ADEQUACY OF RADIO SERVICES  
IN NON-METROPOLITAN AUSTRALIA  
NOVEMBER 2000**

---

---

Broadcasting is the obvious media to utilise and facilitate educational strategies and social development in a form that is easily assimilated by indigenous people. As well as allowing communities to broadcast their own content they should be able to access syndicated broadcasting as well.

There is a need for Federally funded target programs for educating indigenous people to ensure that the necessary skills are available to support indigenous radio stations.

Past Northern Territory experiences have shown that it is difficult to get indigenous radio stations off the ground. Although Federal funding is a vital ingredient it is only one of many issues to be addressed for the effective management of a complex set of issues. A strategy which includes provision for skill based training for technicians, programmers and presenters which carries full accreditation from the appropriate authorities is needed. More importantly it should identify an avenue for ongoing support, assistance and advice on managerial, resourcing and financial issues to ensure long term functionality of indigenous broadcasting facilities.

Ethnic groups in the Northern Territory also need special consideration as they have a much lower numerical representation than do their counterparts living in metropolitan areas. This severely limits their ability to access ethnic recreational resources, news, and education services and contributes to a sense of isolation regardless of where they reside in the Northern Territory.

Support of community radio licensees by increasing access to funding through the relaxation of regulatory restraints is seen as crucial to delivering local content to many of the smaller cultural and language groups.

Providers of syndicated commercial services should be encouraged to enter the Northern Territory marketplace. Additional commercial service providers could be attracted with the combination of Federally funded transmission sites and black spot rectification programs. Signals could then be cheaply and efficiently broadcast by multiple commercial users to a larger audience. In addition the licensing regime could impose regulatory requirements to compel commercial services to provide multiple station programming as a condition of the granting or renewal of licenses.

The Commonwealth Government should review ongoing budget restraints being placed on the ABC in view of its reduced ability to maintain or improve the level of service to its Northern Territory audience. The ABC is an important provider of high quality local news and current affairs programs in the Northern Territory. It also provides a crucial role in coordinating essential radio broadcasting services during the cyclone season. The Northern Territory Government would be deeply concerned if the ABC's capabilities in this area were eroded.

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**NORTHERN TERRITORY GOVERNMENT SUBMISSION TO  
HOUSE COMMUNICATIONS COMMITTEE INQUIRY  
INTO THE ADEQUACY OF RADIO SERVICES  
IN NON-METROPOLITAN AUSTRALIA  
NOVEMBER 2000**

---

---

Of particular concern is that available funds could be allocated to enabling new technologies before ensuring that all Territorians achieve equitable access to existing technologies; thereby exacerbating the service gap that already exists. The Northern Territory Government seeks assurance from the Commonwealth Government that the significant funding cuts to the ABC announced in October would not lead to a reduced level of service in regional areas or limit any expansion of services.

In the absence of a wide variety of commercial services, or services with limited coverage, the ABC provides the most comprehensive service for most Territorians. This fact, coupled with the ABC's high editorial and programming standards in news and current affairs, makes it a vital source of information, the impact of which should not be diminished by undue financial restraint.



NORTHERN TERRITORY GOVERNMENT SUBMISSION TO  
**HOUSE COMMUNICATIONS COMMITTEE INQUIRY  
INTO THE ADEQUACY OF RADIO SERVICES  
IN NON-METROPOLITAN AUSTRALIA**  
NOVEMBER 2000

---

---

**3. FUTURE TRENDS IN RADIO BROADCASTING, INCLUDING  
EMPLOYMENT AND CAREER OPPORTUNITIES, IN NON-  
METROPOLITAN AUSTRALIA**

**3.1 Future Trends**

Emerging technology cannot be ignored. Access to new technology will change the way broadcasters provide quality service and alter the balance of staffing within the broadcasting industry. With the convergence of audio, video and Internet broadcasting the media sector generally should expand and therefore create more opportunities for suitably trained personnel. The requirement for competent and qualified presenters and ancillary staff in developing and presenting programming and content will remain, as it is the content that is the key element in quality broadcasting.

There will be changes, however, in technology skills associated with convergence into the new broadcast media. This online interaction between media sectors should also open up opportunities for Territorians who were limited by geographic isolation in the past.

Commercial channels operating in the Territory are expected to follow current trends. They syndicate most of their programming from the eastern states to reduce costs. There is very little local content and therefore very little training opportunity.

Community radio stations provide opportunities for local involvement and employment, development of skills and a local identity for the community. However, opportunities for the development of community radio in the Northern Territory is limited because of funding difficulties.

Many broadcasters do not get paid for their services and direct employment and career opportunities are restricted. However, participants gain valuable experience, and this experience can often be translated into paid work opportunities in larger centres. It is also hoped that increased demands for localised programming in the future will lead to increased opportunities for employment in content development.



NORTHERN TERRITORY GOVERNMENT SUBMISSION TO  
**HOUSE COMMUNICATIONS COMMITTEE INQUIRY  
INTO THE ADEQUACY OF RADIO SERVICES  
IN NON-METROPOLITAN AUSTRALIA**  
**NOVEMBER 2000**

---

---

### **3.2 Certified Broadcasters**

Due to the lack of education and training, there are few formally qualified radio broadcasters in the Northern Territory. The majority of commercial announcers that are employed in the Territory have been recruited from interstate and most, do not stay after their necessary remote area "work experience" has been completed. Pay rates for commercial broadcasters in the Territory are significantly lower than in other States so this contributes to the lack of accredited radio broadcasters that remain in the Territory.

Future improvement of radio broadcasting and the enhancement of career opportunities is seen to be directly related to the ability for the Northern Territory to train Territorians and offer adequate remuneration to keep them in the Territory. However, the training must result in the achievement of formal qualifications that are nationally recognised to allow relocation to other States and Territories if it suits the aspirations of the individual.

### **3.3 Training for Broadcasters**

To date there has been little training available in non-metropolitan Australia. What training has been available has received little recognition.

Community radio stations conduct on-the-job training to volunteer and ethnic broadcasters and the National broadcaster offers on the job training but no national accreditation. From a training perspective, mechanisms that encourage more local content in community radio programming will result in more opportunities for on the job training.

TOP FM is a major community radio broadcaster in Darwin that is fostering the teaching training and best practice of broadcasting. They have organised a 12 month Certificate course in broadcasting to commence in 2001. The course will be delivered through the Northern Territory University. As well as core units such as journalism, cultural aspects of indigenous broadcasting and ethnic issues will also be included. The course will not be financially self-sufficient so will rely on external funding. It is hoped some time in the future that this course can be raised to Degree level.

### **3.4 Technical Expertise**

Once again, attracting skilled people and keeping them in the Territory is an issue. Radio stations in the Northern Territory find it difficult to attract and retain accredited broadcast technicians for the same reasons as stated above.



NORTHERN TERRITORY GOVERNMENT SUBMISSION TO  
**HOUSE COMMUNICATIONS COMMITTEE INQUIRY  
INTO THE ADEQUACY OF RADIO SERVICES  
IN NON-METROPOLITAN AUSTRALIA**  
**NOVEMBER 2000**

---

---

With the introduction of digital radio transmission there will be a need for more technicians to install infrastructure, but opportunities will not necessarily be ongoing due to the lower maintenance requirements. It is anticipated that outsourcing of maintenance functions will be the norm.

### **3.5 Observations**

Training should be made available to Territorians, in the Territory. It should also be aimed at teaching Territorians to do the job and financial incentives are required to keep skills in the Territory.

It would appear that employment prospects in the radio broadcasting sector are limited due to an apparent stagnation of industry growth. Feedback from Northern Territory based broadcasters indicate that individuals usually need to be multi-skilled in many aspects of broadcasting, including management of production, resource allocation, policy and programming development, representing the station and even fund raising. This range of activities requires a high level of interpersonal, verbal and written communication skills, administrative and technical experience, so education should not be understated. Unless courses available in the Northern Territory are accredited, well structured and offer a useful range of subjects, the qualifications will be of little value elsewhere. The training should also keep pace with emerging technologies.

Significant social benefit can be gained by teaching content generation prior to tertiary level. For example there have been instances of children in remote communities producing their own content for transmission on their local community radio stations. This initiative has encouraged a higher attendance rate amongst disinterested children.

Community radio broadcasters who offer informal training and work experience should be encouraged by enabling access to increased funding or relaxation of regulatory restrictions.





NORTHERN TERRITORY GOVERNMENT SUBMISSION TO  
**HOUSE COMMUNICATIONS COMMITTEE INQUIRY  
INTO THE ADEQUACY OF RADIO SERVICES  
IN NON-METROPOLITAN AUSTRALIA**  
NOVEMBER 2000

---

---

**4. THE EFFECT ON INDIVIDUALS, FAMILIES AND SMALL BUSINESS IN  
NON-METROPOLITAN AUSTRALIA OF NETWORKING OF RADIO  
PROGRAMMING, PARTICULARLY IN RELATION TO LOCAL NEWS  
SERVICES, SPORT, COMMUNITY SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENTS AND  
OTHER FORMS OF LOCAL CONTENT**

**4.1 Networking**

Networked radio broadcasts are very beneficial to Territorians as limited production resources can be used to benefit multiple audiences. This is significant for the Territory that has many small and scattered communities.

Syndication of programs is also valuable as it provides a connection between metropolitan and non-metropolitan Australia and provides an opportunity for people in more regional areas to access national and international programs.

However, the dissemination of local news services, sport, community and service announcements and local content through community radio services should not be impeded by the presence of networked or syndicated services. Ultimately people should have the choice of accessing local, national or international content according to their varying needs.

Community radio broadcasters that take links to deliver regional content and news services are popular. They can cater to their niche market by offering, for example, the broadcast of both national and local rugby league. It also acts as a conduit for small business to promote themselves and provides free air time for non-profit community groups to promote local events.

Community Radio is an important source for free advertising of social and community events for many non-profit organisations in the Northern Territory.

**4.2 Observations**

Free to air broadcasting, of any form, should be maintained and diversity in broadcasting in general, and community broadcasting in particular, should be encouraged.

Networking should be enabled, but not at the expense of niche market demand for local content.



**NORTHERN TERRITORY GOVERNMENT SUBMISSION TO  
HOUSE COMMUNICATIONS COMMITTEE INQUIRY  
INTO THE ADEQUACY OF RADIO SERVICES  
IN NON-METROPOLITAN AUSTRALIA  
NOVEMBER 2000**

---

---

Community radio requires the full encouragement and support of the Federal Government through funding and relaxation of regulatory restrictions. In particular, the regulations relating to sponsorship requirements for community radio are not appropriate for the Territory. The proposal to increase revenue by allowing sale of sponsorship for 10 minutes per hour, rather than 5, cannot be effectively adopted by remote community radio stations due to the lack of potential sponsors in their area.



NORTHERN TERRITORY GOVERNMENT SUBMISSION TO  
**HOUSE COMMUNICATIONS COMMITTEE INQUIRY  
INTO THE ADEQUACY OF RADIO SERVICES  
IN NON-METROPOLITAN AUSTRALIA**  
NOVEMBER 2000

---

---

**5. THE POTENTIAL FOR NEW TECHNOLOGIES SUCH AS DIGITAL  
RADIO TO PROVIDE ENHANCED AND MORE LOCALISED RADIO  
SERVICES IN METROPOLITAN, REGIONAL AND RURAL AREAS**

**5.1 Advanced Technologies**

Territorians are not slow to embrace new technologies.

The potential for new technologies to enhance service quality is high but the capital costs of digital delivery to a large area with a dispersed population are high compared to existing analog technologies.

In the case of digital radio, the prohibitive cost of providing the necessary infrastructure, combined with high costs to the consumer to purchase new receivers would impede uptake. In many areas the population is too small to make the establishment of infrastructure economically viable for providers. It is our view, however that all Territorians, regardless of geographic isolation, are entitled to the same quality and quantity of radio broadcasting services as is enjoyed by other Australians.

Although the introduction of digital broadcasting will enable sharing of transmission facilities and therefore reduce broadcasters' delivery costs, both infrastructure costs and the cost of uptake to the general population hinders migration to the new technology. Digital radio does not appear to provide the solution to the issues facing the Territory at this time. The immediate focus should be on ensuring that Territorians enjoy the same choice and level of coverage in currently available services before embarking upon new forms of service with restricted accessibility.

At this stage the application of digital production techniques to improve production capacity, rather than the digital delivery of broadcasting services, is the Territory's primary focus.

All centres may benefit from the introduction of policies to encourage aggregated commercial radio transmission sites and the delivery of syndicated content. This would ensure that metropolitan residents, at least, have access to a much wider range of broadcasting than is currently available.

Satellite delivery has a greater potential to provide comprehensive radio coverage. Although it may help economic delivery of services to existing receivers in more remote areas, it is likely to be expensive to set up and expensive for the user.



NORTHERN TERRITORY GOVERNMENT SUBMISSION TO  
**HOUSE COMMUNICATIONS COMMITTEE INQUIRY  
INTO THE ADEQUACY OF RADIO SERVICES  
IN NON-METROPOLITAN AUSTRALIA**  
NOVEMBER 2000

---

---

## **5.2 Enhancement of Service**

Although enhancing the quality of radio is an important issue, the priority for the Northern Territory in the short term is to provide appropriate radio coverage across the Northern Territory to deliver emergency and news services in a cost effective manner.

## **5.3 Localisation of Radio Services**

New technology would provide many opportunities to enhance and localise radio services in the Northern Territory. Linking community radio stations with local indigenous stations, for example, would enable a community station to broadcast relevant Aboriginal programming to the broader community and at the same time provide opportunities for Aboriginal people to produce programs in a non-threatening environment at their local station.

New technology also enables local broadcasters to provide a more flexible and reliable service to the community in areas where conditions can be changeable and, in addition, a more mobile service which can expand the range of local programming opportunities.

Content development in digital format means lower production costs for local radio to produce cultural and content specific programs and these lower costs would provide more opportunity for localisation of services.

## **5.4 Observations**

In the view of the Northern Territory Government, all Territorians should have access to the same quality and quantity of service as people living in major metropolitan areas. The best way to achieve this requires careful analysis of the implications of the introduction of new technologies and alternative delivery techniques.

The role of Government at all levels is to foster only those new technologies which provide quantitative and qualitative social change and pave the way for consumer migration to that new technology.

Matching the coverage of far reaching AM services with digital services in regional and remote areas is expensive but consideration of advanced technologies, is a long-term strategic necessity. Broadcasters need a supportive regulatory environment in order to adopt appropriate new technologies. There is also a need to develop a diversity of media sources that include appropriate technological solutions.



**NORTHERN TERRITORY GOVERNMENT SUBMISSION TO  
HOUSE COMMUNICATIONS COMMITTEE INQUIRY  
INTO THE ADEQUACY OF RADIO SERVICES  
IN NON-METROPOLITAN AUSTRALIA  
NOVEMBER 2000**

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In the interim there is an immediate need to achieve border to border AM radio coverage within the Northern Territory.

Only after this is achieved should the Federal Government give its full consideration to digital radio at the consumer and broadcaster level.

Careful management of transition to any new technology is crucial, particularly in broadcasting, as the premature termination of analog services before ensuring a full uptake of new technology may leave certain groups without radio services altogether.



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IN NON-METROPOLITAN AUSTRALIA**  
NOVEMBER 2000

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## **6. RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Federal Government should determine the full extent of signal propagation, and radio black spots across the Northern Territory, particularly in remote regions.

Border to border national radio coverage in recognition of the existence of remote coastal communities of the Northern Territory that lie within meteorologically high-risk areas should be a priority for the Federal Government.

Provision of continuous national and commercial broadcast coverage along the full length of all major highways in the Northern Territory is a high priority. A detailed study is required to determine the appropriate use of technology for geographically specific situations.

There needs to be a relaxation of regulations and increased access to Federal funding to assist the expansion of opportunities for all forms of broadcasting, particularly community radio that plays a vital role in the social welfare of isolated communities and small ethnic groups.

Federally funded target programs are required to develop an appropriate level of skilling for indigenous people in the management of resources and associated services associated with owning and operating community radio broadcast stations. This strategy is aimed at encouraging greater participation by indigenous people to determine their own educational and entertainment inputs through broadcast media.

Federal Government support for the ABC in the Northern Territory should be maintained to allow the continuation of high quality local news and current affairs programs and crucial radio broadcasting services during the cyclone season.

The Federal Government is requested to provide strategic guidelines for national uptake of new technologies to enable the Northern Territory to make informed decisions about the viability of implementation in our geographically distinct location. National policies that benefit the majority of Australians may deplete services to small population centres where migration to new systems is not viable.



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NOVEMBER 2000**

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An environment conducive to enabling aggregated commercial radio transmission sites and syndicated broadcasting will develop naturally as a result of a competitive environment and will provide a wider choice of program content for the consumer. The Federal Government should explore opportunities to encourage this process.



NORTHERN TERRITORY GOVERNMENT SUBMISSION TO  
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**NOVEMBER 2000**

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**7. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

- ABC Radio Darwin/ABC Radio Territory
- Darwin Top FM Community Radio
- 8KIN FM (CAAMA Community Radio)
- 8EAR GoveFM Community Radio