

**SUBMISSION BY
MONARO
COMMUNITY
RADIO
INCORPORATED
TO THE INQUIRY
INTO REGIONAL
RADIO IN RURAL
AND REMOTE
AUSTRALIA**

**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES COMMITTEE ON COMMUNICATIONS,
TRANSPORT AND THE ARTS**

REGIONAL RADIO INQUIRY
TERMS OF REFERENCE

- 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.

THE NATURE AND PHILOSOPHY OF COMMUNITY BROADCASTING

During the past 25 years community broadcasting has grown to assume a significant role in Australia's social and cultural life. The sector provides a range of general and special interest programming to a diverse set of audiences. As the third tier of the free-to-air broadcasting system, its continuing development ensures structural diversity and provides the opportunity for many people to take control and to become producers of radio and TV programs, as well as consumers. This is of major significance in a world where there is increasing opportunity for passive consumption of a vast array of mass media entertainment but a decline in outlets at the local community level for people to take control of their own communications needs. The community broadcasting sector is sustained by the efforts of over 15,000 volunteers and its services are both culturally diverse and local in focus. In addition to specific licensing arrangements for remote Aboriginal communities¹ throughout Australia there are now some 160 fully-licensed community radio stations, 155 temporary licensees (TCBL's) and 8 community television licensees. Over the past 2 years the sector has experienced a major growth phase due to the advent of the temporary licensing regime inaugurated through an amendment to the Act in 1997, and the long-awaited and much delayed outcome of the ABA's spectrum planning and licensing process.

The Broadcasting Services Act 1992 (BSA) provides the statutory framework for all categories of broadcasting services, including 'Community'. Part 3 of the Act sets out the planning powers and responsibilities of the Australian Broadcasting Authority (ABA) which include criteria such as the demographics, social and economic characteristics and the demand for new services in each service area. Section 15 solely defines the service category "community broadcasting" and requires that services are provided for community purposes, not operated for profit or part of a profit-making enterprise and that programs are receivable on commonly available equipment, free of charge. Part 6 sets out suitability criteria for licence applicants and the responsibilities of the ABA with respect to licence allocation. Schedule 2, Part 5 sets out the statutory conditions which apply to community broadcasting licences.

In deciding whether to allocate a community broadcasting licence, the ABA must have regard to a number of elements including the extent to which the proposed service would meet the existing and perceived future needs of the community within the service area, the nature and diversity of interests of that community and the nature and diversity of other broadcasting services.

Unlike commercial broadcasting licences which are allocated at auction, community broadcasting licences are subject to ABA discretion or what is sometimes known colloquially as a 'beauty contest'. When a new community licence is offered in an area it may be subject to competing community based applicants known as 'aspirants' each vying to be recognised as representing valid communities of interests and adjudged to be most worthy of holding a licence.

From the community broadcasting sector's point of view, access and participation are the defining principles, which means that volunteers become involved in making and presenting programs or in the management and technical operation of services. The sector is sustained by the voluntary efforts of over 15,000 people and some 300 paid

THE EFFECT ON INDIVIDUALS, FAMILIES AND SMALL BUSINESS IN NON-METROPOLITAN AREAS

People in non-metropolitan areas do not want city-based formats on their local commercial radio stations. We want country radio for country people.

Whilst the Monaro region is not a large market for radio, the region should not be ignored by commercial or ABC radio in relation to news and current affairs programming. This region is absent of any ABC locally-based radio station, and neither local commercial service provides any local topical interest programming. The only current affairs outputs are the local news bulletins on 2XL and SNOW-FM. Never, on either service, is there any regular program for the rural producer. Monaro Community Radio fills this gap.

Amongst a community such as that of the Monaro region, people maintain many interests. In music those interests extend beyond top forty and golden oldies. Community radio stations, such as Monaro Community Radio, always try to offer the public a real alternative, and the audience for community radio stations is always increasing. Some community stations, such as MOB-FM Mount Isa, and Great Lakes FM Forster-Tuncurry, are market leaders in their area, because they give the people what they want, not what station operators think they want to hear.

Features such as "community noticeboard" were once commonplace on commercial radio stations, but they have substantially disappeared. This was once a valued piece of daily programming, where people learnt what was happening in their town or region. With networking of television (since aggregation), "community noticeboard" features on commercial radio stations have become even more important. If the commercial sector fails to provide what the people want to hear, chances are, the local community stations shall, once again, fill the void.

Commercial and community broadcasters, under the former Broadcasting and Television Act, were required to provide a "Promise of Performance" which related to the type of programming they were to present. In relation to commercial radio, we view it essential that those performance agreement be reinstated to the Broadcasting Services Act to ensure commercial broadcasters adequately service the community they are licensed to serve and to eliminate any possibility, in areas where there are more than one commercial station, duplicating formats.

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

Most regional commercial radio stations today are aligned or completely owned by one of a number of large radio networks (DMG, RG, Austereo). In some cases, an entire day's program content on a local rural or remote commercial radio station may originate in a large city in a different State. This occurs as a result of the economics of operating commercial radio stations. A similar situation exists also with ABC radio services.

In rural and remote Australia networking (and automation) has removed the capability of locally-based commercial or ABC stations to adequately service the area they are licensed to serve. In the case of commercial broadcasters, their primary interest is towards their shareholders and not the listening audience. At some local commercial radio stations there is no local news service.

Radio is regarded as the most instant form of media for the distribution of news and other information, but this becomes difficult in locations where the local commercial radio service is only a relay for programming originating elsewhere.

Networking and automation has effectively removed the 'country' from country radio. Country commercial radio stations, particularly FM services, attempt to present city-based formats. Gone from many country radio stations are the rural reports, which is so important to the rural producer.

During floods in northern NSW in 1996 it was not the commercial radio stations in that was the primary link to the community – it was the Narrabri-based community broadcaster MAX-FM. They were appropriately recognised for this service.

Monaro Community Radio has sought to expand the variety of radio programming available to the people of the Monaro region, through the provision of:

- easy listening music
- country music
- radio for the print handicapped
- programs produced by challenged people
- livestock sales reports
- stock veterinary advice

We are the only radio service in the Monaro region which gives on-air recognition towards local recording artists and we are extremely proud to present the recordings of any local artist on the station. This is a feature which no commercial broadcaster would ever embark upon.

Inadequate recognition is given to community broadcasting and the role they now serve amongst local communities. The sector is greatly under funded.

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

Country commercial radio once provided the training ground for new announcers, who progressed to attain positions at larger stations and, hopefully, were accepted by a capital city station. Career opportunities within country commercial radio stations have been minimalised, as a result of networking and automation.

An announcer on a country commercial radio station may once have been involved in all aspects of a station, including programming, traffic, music scheduling, sales, plus on-air presentation. On-air duties were not simply limited to a slick presentation format, but may have included the writing and presentation of news bulletin, hosting horse racing or football broadcasts. Announcers were skilled. In the year 2000 most programming, traffic and music scheduling is achieved centrally, with programs being presented from elsewhere in Australia.

Metropolitan commercial stations do not provide much opportunity towards up and coming announcers. Most AM and FM commercial stations seek to maintain the same announcers for decades.

Australia's community radio stations today have become the training ground for announcers, where they maintain the opportunity to become involved in production, sponsorship sales, copywriting, plus on-air presentation.

Opportunities for employment within commercial radio in Australia will become even further reduced if the current degree of networking or automation is allowed to continue. It is possible that in the future, unless the Federal Government legislates to prohibit such, that all commercial radio stations in rural and remote Australia will become nothing more than translators for bigger stations.

MONARO COMMUNITY RADIO
OUR STORY

Monaro Community Radio was founded in 1996 to provide an alternative in radio program to that of the existing commercial radio services. The Monaro region is presently served by two permanent broadcasting services:

- SNOW-FM
- 2XL

Both of these stations are owned and operated by the same company and are a part of the Capital Radio Network, based in Canberra.

The region maintains no locally based ABC radio service.

The two permanent commercial broadcasting services operate restrictive formats and it is felt they inadequately completely service the region. Monaro Community Radio has attempted to fill this gap.

**THE NETWORKING OF RADIO PROGRAMMING, PARTICULARLY IN
RELATION TO LOCAL NEWS SERVICES, SPORT, COMMUNITY
SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENTS AND OTHER FORMS OF LOCAL
CONTENT**

The networking of radio programming maintains an adverse effect upon Australian radio, as it has in the United States. Networking tends to reduce the availability of local news services, as all activities become centralised. Instead of local news, you gain 'regional news'.

Country commercial radio stations once did broadcast local football matches and even local horse racing. This level of service has generally disappeared. In some locations, the local community radio station has taken over the coverage of football matches, particularly in Victoria.

The ability to provide community service announcements has also been reduced by commercial radio stations. Such features an important element of radio programming, so local people know what is happening in their region.

Commercial radio stations rarely broadcast recordings produced by local artists. This is a task left to the local community stations.

To describe rural and remote commercial radio stations as 'local stations' is absurd in thesedays of networking and automation.