ACT GOVERNMENT SUBMISSION

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES STANDING COMMITTEE ON COMMUNICATIONS, INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY AND THE ARTS INQUIRY INTO COMMUNITY BROADCASTING

APRIL 2006

General comments

The Community Broadcasting sector in the ACT, while not yet incorporating television, plays a complementary role to that undertaken by the commercial sector. Community radio offers the local community, and in particular disadvantaged groups or communities with shared interests or common cultural/ linguistic backgrounds, an independent platform for the expression of views and ideas. In this respect, community broadcasting supports the ACT Government's Social Plan theme of "Neighbourhood and Belonging", which has as one of its key goals to "reduce the gap between the information rich and the information poor". The ACT Government recognises the important role that community broadcasters play in this respect.

Community Broadcasting in the ACT: There are currently no community digital TV broadcasters in the ACT, although there may be future potential scope for such a service. At present, the ACT has six community radio broadcasters with access to the analogue spectrum, comprising one AM service (1RPH), and five FM services (all others). These are:

1. ArtSound FM; or '1ART'(92.7 MHz);
2. Canberra Christian Radio; or '1WAY FM' (91.9 MHz);
3. Ethnic Broadcasting Council of the ACT; or '1CMS' (91.1 MHz);
4. Community Radio 2XX; or '1XXR' (98.3 MHz);
5. Print Handicapped Radio of the ACT Inc.; or '1RPH' (1125 KHz);
6. Valley FM Broadcasters Association Inc.; or '1VFM' (89.5 MHz).

Community radio complements commercial radio by broadcasting specialist music genres, spoken word programs relating to the arts, and by consciously aiming to showcase and promote local talent. Typically run on a cooperative basis by volunteers, community radio in the ACT also provides a valuable avenue for local training and experience in recording and broadcast technology, as well as in radio programming and administration.

Commonwealth Policy: The ACT Government notes the announcement in April 2006 on digital radio frameworks by the Commonwealth Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, the Hon Senator Helen Coonan. The ACT considers that specific aspects of the framework, including the opportunities for community broadcasters to be included in the digital broadcast spectrum and Commonwealth Government funding for 2006 – 07, and measures to assist community broadcasters to convert to digital broadcasting, will open up new opportunities for community broadcasters.

The ACT Government's comments against the terms of reference are provided below.

A. The scope and role of Australian community broadcasting across radio, television, the Internet and other broadcasting technologies

Role of Community Radio: Community radio in the ACT typically provides a mix of general news, local information, information on government services and government initiatives; it also supports cultural maintenance. Community broadcasters provide a link to the local community in general, particularly for people with low levels of English. Programs are typically produced and presented by volunteers who must demonstrate that they are responsive to their audiences.

Public Benefits: Community radio provides the opportunity for communities of common interests (and/ or shared cultural/ linguistic backgrounds) to have a public voice and to develop and maintain a robust and vibrant sense of identity. It allows these communities to more fully participate in public discourse on matters affecting them. It also serves as a focus for developing a sense of local community through communicating shared goals, activities and achievements.

The ACT Department of Housing, Disability and Community Services is a strong supporter of community radio in Canberra, recognising that it is an important medium for many groups and provides a valuable service to people who may be disadvantaged or marginalised in the community. In this regard, the Government believes community broadcasting is a vital tool for overcoming social isolation.

An Essential Resource: Radio 1RPH, which provides a service to those who have difficulty reading or are unable to read newspapers, etc, such as the elderly, is considered to be an essential resource for Canberra's print handicapped.

Catering for Special Interests: Community broadcasters typically cater for listeners with specialist or specialised interests – as in the arts, or selected music genres. For example, ArtSound FM was established in the ACT as a non-profit entity by and for the local arts constituency.

The Ethnic Broadcasting Council (EBC) has supported youth programming by encouraging young people to participate as well as by providing broadcasting time especially for youth. It also offers access to other community groups and interests – such as Community @ Work, and indigenous broadcasting.

Community Service: Community radio provides individuals with opportunities for community service and personal development, whether as sponsor, donor, board member, presenter or (other) volunteer, and serves as a focal point for cultural activity and artistic expression in the region.

Community radio allows for a more personalised form of expression than is found in the commercial media; it is not unusual for one person, or a small team, to conceive, write, produce, engineer, perform and deliver a product exactly as they envisioned, and receive direct and often immediate feedback from their audience.

<u>Educational Uses of Broadcasting:</u> The ACT Government considers that community broadcasting has significant potential to be utilised for educational purposes. There are some projects contributing to principles of community broadcasting already in place within some ACT schools. These include a digital radio broadcasting pilot at Narrabundah College, and web casting and conferencing at Lyneham High School (with schools in Oklahoma, in the USA). Other ACT schools have comprehensive Arts programs incorporating broadcasting.

The ACT Department of Education and Training has an active program delivering broadband services to schools that will eventually allow them to fully participate in broadcasting using digital media. National bandwidth initiatives, including using AARNet, designed to increase school access to national cultural resources (including community programs), will allow collaboration and resource sharing between schools within the ACT, both nationally and internationally.

<u>Dissemination of Emergency Information:</u> The ACT Government recognises that the community broadcasting sector is an important part of the media landscape in the ACT. While audience numbers for individual community broadcasters may not be as high as for mainstream broadcasters, it is recognised that community radio complements these mainstream services, serving the needs of many marginalised or disadvantaged groups, and so should not be ignored when considering dissemination of emergency information.

The ACT Emergency Services Authority has traditionally focused its media liaison efforts on mainstream media outlets (having signed MOUs regarding the dissemination of emergency messages and information with Canberra's major media outlets). However, it recently initiated moves to engage further with community broadcasters, mid last year. This initiative began with 1RPH (Radio for Print Handicapped).

<u>Public Information:</u> The ACT Department of Urban Services manages the ACT Government Internet site (www.act.gov.au) as well as its own websites and the Canberra Connect services portal. Market research conducted by the ACT Department of Urban Services shows a gradual growth in consumers moving to the Internet for information and transaction-based services.

The type and nature of public information and services that may be accessed on ACT Government sponsored websites is an avenue deserving further consideration.

B. Content and programming requirements that reflect the character of Australia and its cultural diversity

<u>Multiculturalism:</u> While community radio has become a cost effective vehicle of social/cultural expression for many, the Ethnic Broadcasters' Council notes areas of unmet demand, particularly with regard to recent and emerging small foreign language communities in the ACT. Also, in some larger foreign language communities, the existing broadcast times may not enable program makers to cater equitably for the diversity found within a given community (e.g., age, gender, religious and cultural/linguistic needs).

ACT Multicultural Radio Grants Program: The ACT Government, through its Department of Disability and Community Services, supports multicultural community broadcasting in the ACT through its *Multicultural Radio Grants* Program. The ACT Office of Multicultural Affairs administers the program. A total of $100,000 is provided annually to community radio stations and multicultural community broadcasters, being groups producing multicultural programs on community radio.

Grants are currently awarded to multicultural broadcasters for provision of necessary equipment (eg. headphones); to subsidise broadcasting fees; and to community radio stations for initiatives that directly support multicultural broadcasters at the station.

Items not funded in the Program include capital equipment; ongoing commitments such as contracts, or rental agreements beyond the grant period; retrospective costs; capital works (including the cost of repairs, extensions or renovations to buildings); and commercial fundraising.

Local Value: Community radio is well positioned to respond quickly to local needs and events, and to talk about its own (local) community, reflecting back its own personalities and interests.

Recording Local Heritage: Community radio also has the capacity to produce private and public audio and/or visual recordings to preserve personal and public histories for future generations. Community broadcasters may play a role in facilitating productions and co-productions that might otherwise not be undertaken, by finding grants to commission local works and by offering production facilities. For example, ArtSound FM has plans to increase communications with and between the regions adjacent to Canberra by developing a network of community arts correspondents, contributing "program modules" that reflect what's going on in the daily life of the arts community.

Encouraging the Arts: There remains considerable scope for specialised programming that reflects the cultural diversity of local communities and that celebrates and fosters Canberra's artistic traditions and innovations. Canberrans spend significantly more on arts activities and services than do people elsewhere in Australia, according to ABS figures, and community radio would appear to be an ideal medium for reflecting this diversity.

C. Technological opportunities, including digital, to expand community broadcasting networks

The growth of new communications technologies, in conjunction with the emergence of more efficient digital distribution media, presages a new era of broadcasting, and communications. The Internet and 'pod-casting' are transforming conventional ways of receiving programming and distant radio stations, and other program sources are available to Australians in ever growing numbers.

However, while digital technologies may present new opportunities to expand community broadcasting networks, community broadcasters believe that the sense of intimacy or closeness between program makers and their audiences remains an issue of prime concern. Many broadcasters feel that "choice" for Australians would be meaningless unless it also continues to include programming which reflects local community cultural heritage.

<u>Access to Technology</u>: Digital radio has the capacity to be interactive and offers the prospect of,or potential for improvements over analogue sound. This includes the promise of improved sound quality, greater user choice, interference free reception, random access, and text and data services.

The advancement of digital technology means that community radio can potentially have access to some of the best high quality production tools. Ideally, this means there no longer needs to be a technical quality distinction between community radio and its national commercial peers.

D. Opportunities and threats to achieving a diverse and robust network of community broadcasters.

Opportunities
<u>Training Programs</u>: With the switch over to digital fast approaching, increasingly there will be a need to enable the migration to and use of new technologies. This will require a clear policy by Governments – both on the introduction of new technologies and on how to continue to support robust participation by the broad range of community interests. In particular, community broadcasters may need to be supported technologically with continuing training programs.

<u>Expanding Community Information Services</u>: The development of TransACT's *Channelvision* provides opportunities for extending the penetration of DUS's current community information role, through digital broadcasting where greater uptake may occur. NSW Government's pilot of digital data broadcasting suggests significant potential for improving the reach of community information through an appropriately structured investment approach, focussed on well-researched community demand.

Threats
<u>Financial Issues</u>: Due to limited funding and sponsorship options, many community broadcasters in the ACT have expressed concerns about the high cost of changing over to digital equipment. In particular, there are concerns that there may be a limited ability for community radio stations to maintain current program levels for their audiences.

Some have expressed concerns that free spectrum access for community broadcasting may not continue once the process of converting to digital transmission systems for television and radio begins. Also, if digital broadcasting has the technical capacity to create new broadcast channels, not all community radio broadcasters are convinced this would benefit the sector, given the present limited available funding and income generating options.

Community broadcasters rely on federal government assistance in paying for the existing services they provide. However, the subsidies received (eg, for ethnic community language broadcasts) are considerably less than the cost of service provision.

<u>Limited Sponsorship Options</u>: Community broadcasters, through the *Broadcasting Services Act*, are limited in their capacity to carry sponsorship or advertising. Options to address this include increasing the limit on sponsorship per hour (currently limited to 5 minutes of messages in any hour).

<u>Need to Ensure Long-term Sector Viability</u>: The ACT Government considers that any changes to the legislative landscape governing community broadcasters should factor in the long-term viability of this sector, especially when it comes to costs associated with changing from analogue to digital transmission. The ACT Emergency Services Authority aims to ensure that dissemination of its key emergency messages and information is delivered to the widest possible audience, including communities served by community radio.

<u>Safeguarding Essential Services</u>: The ACT Government would view with concern any threats to the on-going viability of essential services such as the Radio for the Print Handicapped (Radio 1 RPH) in the ACT.

Key factors to achieving a diverse and robust network of community broadcasters and services, include the following:

- <u>Need for Low Cost Facilities</u>: The availability of low cost community broadcasting facilities will be required for public schools to be able to provide education and training opportunities to students. It is unlikely that any school would be able to pay for the significant costs for the installation of digital equipment.

- <u>Access to Digital Spectrum</u>: It is important that community broadcasters have access, on reasonable terms, to sufficient digital broadcasting frequencies, to enable them to meet their community objectives using the most up to date technologies. Care must be taken to ensure that community radio stations have access to broadcasting sites at reasonable rates that reflect their not-for-profit status. As commercial broadcasters have consistently opposed any expansion of the community broadcasting sector, there is a need to ensure that commercial operators of national broadcasting sites do not discriminate against or exclude any licensed community broadcaster wishing to gain access to prime transmission sites.

- <u>Access to Resources</u>: ACT schools would benefit from continued access to community broadcasting resources, as well as to being able to contribute to the national pool of resources. The ACT however has modest financial capacity and technical capabilities to achieve this. Digital media resources are increasingly used in ACT schools through initiatives including 'The <u>Le@rning</u> Federation'. Students and teachers are able to discover, manipulate, store and present these resources within existing systems in schools, such as 'myclasses'. Easy access to resources as a result of community broadcasting within the digital sphere will be valuable to schools, and should be encouraged without the burden of onerous copyright restrictions and payments.