

NRN

NATIONAL RADIO NEWS

Submission 112

16 March, 2006
The Hon. Jackie Kelly
Australian Parliament House
A.C.T.
2600

Re.Standing Committee Enquiry into Community Broadcasting

Dear Ms. Kelly,

Please find a submission for this enquiry particularly with regard to part four of the terms of reference:” Opportunities and threats to achieving a diverse and robust network of community broadcasters”

Recent moves by commercial radio networks Southern Cross and Macquarie Regional to have their programming broadcast on community radio stations pose real threats to the integrity and diversity of community radio. The community radio sector exists to provide innovative and alternative programming to other sectors, such as commercial radio.

Part of the Community Broadcasting Code of Practice requires stations: “enhance the diversity of programming choices available...”; and “break down prejudice on the basis of ethnicity, race, chosen language, gender, sexual preference....” and more. Programs being offered to community stations, such as The John Laws Show, do not fulfil these requirements. The Laws Show has a history of enquiries from a variety of regulatory authorities. The Laws Show has been known to stereotype community members and is in fact currently before the Administrative Decisions Tribunal on vilification claims. The “cash for comment” issue is also a real concern as there are strict guidelines for sponsorship on community radio. A repeat episode on a community station could severely compromise the whole sector.

The re-broadcasting of commercial programming on community stations could have a dire effect on the community sector. There will be no incentive for community stations to become involved in program making. There will be an erosion of the point-of-difference from mainstream media. Community stations will become de-facto relay transmitters for the commercial networks.

The commercial radio push into the community sector is also a real threat to the existence of National Radio News. NRN is a news service specifically designed for community radio, and funded by the CBF to do this function. NRN has a strong journalism training component, heavily funded by Charles Sturt University. Former NRN staff and cadets now work for ABC, Sky News and other main commercial television and radio news groups.

National Radio News produces around 90 “live” hourly bulletins, seven days a week, using its own resources with input from AAP, BBC, ABC and Sky News. This service is provided to Community Radio Network stations on monthly subscription basis. Subscription fees average to around only 50 cents per bulletin, which is well below cost recovery to maintain this service. The current standard of NRN bulletins very high, often scooping other better resourced mainstream services. NRN strives to provide a point of difference in its coverage based on the values of public journalism.

The existence of NRN relies upon the take-up of the service by community radio. NRN has 92 active subscribers from 182 stations in the Community Radio Network. Whilst traditionally most subscribers have come from regional areas, NRN has recently come to terms with a number of stations in strong metropolitan markets, which demonstrates the quality of the service.

Although NRN is presently quite stable, the “sweetheart” deals on offer from commercial networks to community stations may threaten the future viability of NRN. These deals include incentives such as: 2 month free trials of news service; take John Laws with a Southern Cross News package included; Macquarie News offered at “half the rate” of NRN. As most community stations have limited income streams, these are potentially huge incentives to switch news services.

This is a predatory action from the commercial sector seeking to claim greater audience reach. The commercial networks have in-built cost structures which allow for their news and programming to be heavily subsidised to the community sector, or even given away. Apart from compromising community stations in some instances it is also encouraging poor business practice. There is evidence that a couple of stations heavily in debt are preparing to switch to “free” news services rather than meet their arrears.

National Radio News seeks nothing other than the pursuit of providing news excellence to the Community Radio Network, with the training component offering “real news” experience rather than classroom theory.

The short-term advantage sought by the commercial sector will undermine a 30 year history of an association which was formed to provide something different and something better. I trust the Enquiry will scrutinise and expedite immediate action so that the identified threats do not cause irreparable damage to community broadcasting.

Yours Sincerely

Peter Hetherington
Manager
National Radio News

cc. Peter Andren
Federal Member for Calare