

SUBMISSION TO

**THE HOUSE STANDING COMMITTEE ON
COMMUNICATIONS INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY
AND THE ARTS
INQUIRY INTO COMMUNITY BROADCASTING**

BY

COMMUNITY MEDIA SERVICES

March 14 2006

Section 1

This section introduces and summarises our submission.

1.1 introductory remarks

Thank you for the opportunity to engage with some of the issues raised by this inquiry.

We are a small not for profit association from Melbourne, Victoria, providing research and development services to the community arts sector. We have provided research and alternative production methods to the community television sector in Melbourne. Our present focus in the community broadcasting sector is on subtitling television programs in languages other than English and the content analysis of community television broadcasts.

1.2 Executive Summary

Section 2 of our submission addresses the scope and role of Australian community broadcasting across radio, television, the internet and other broadcasting technologies. The new technologies do not currently provide a broadcasting environment that allows a strong sense of community ownership. The internet is fragmented and inherently internationalised. While community-based projects are exploring the internet as a tool to connect Australian communities, internet technologies do not present as coherent a topology as a fixed-frequency call sign for a community to adopt as its own.

Section 3 of our submission discusses the content and programming carried by community broadcasters that reflect the character of Australia and its diversity. Programming carried by community broadcasters reflects a robust and diverse community based contribution to Australian cultural life that has little or no direct ongoing government funding, low barriers to entry, good regulation, and continuing education and training opportunities.

Section 4 of our submission identifies a weakness in the distribution of Federal Government funding for cultural activities to the community broadcasting sector. Government should not directly fund the production of programs by community broadcasters. Funding should instead be distributed by independent cultural organizations, for example the Australia Council or Film Commission.

Section 5 summarises our submission again.

Section 2

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

This section addresses the scope and role of Australian community broadcasting across radio, television and the internet.

2.1 New communications technologies and community broadcasting.

Community broadcasters are using new communications technologies to enhance the experience of their fixed-frequency broadcast, rather than as replacements for it.

Melbourne community television station channel 31, through its constituent groups, has engaged with internet television since 1992 in a series of events called "Cyberthon" staged by TVU, students from RMIT, and the Melbourne arts and music communities. In 1996 RMITV, a founder of channel 31 Melbourne, mentored by the Telstra Strategic development group, broadcast six episodes of an interactive television program called "Spectrum" that used internet and bulletin board services to engage audiences with a range of interactive experiences of television (source:<http://www.amjaffers.com/vjmandala/cyberthon/index.html>).

Those early experiments showed that the internet is not broadcast media. Rather it is a set of connections between objects that may be made to behave like radios, or televisions, but those behaviours are models imposed on internet infrastructure rather than inherent in it.

While internet radio and television stations provide choice to Australians, there is no evidence that our local communities have any chance be stakeholders in them. Internet communities tend to be global, rather than local, focussed upon international issues rather than local ones, and tend to carry multinational advertising targeting individual users. The podcast phenomena, for example, is based upon individual rather than group effort, is aimed at international rather than local audiences, and centres upon an American company through an American commercial server, i-Tunes. Internet radio streams and video podcasts are unlikely to promote the same sense of pride and ownership that Australian communities take in their community broadcasters.

Most people use telecommunications to keep in touch with family and friends.
(source:Gillard 1998 'Telecommunications user research and public policy'. In Coady, T., & Langtry, B. (eds), All Connected Melbourne University Press)

In Victoria we have a bold experiment called My Connected Community (mc2) that uses the connectivity capabilities of the internet in a model that leverages its telephone-like qualities. It aims to enhance links between groups of individuals by providing free web services like chatroom, forum, message board, mailing list, file storage and messaging services that local communities use to enhance the experience of their local communities and community groups. While it is too early to draw either data or conclusions from that project, it is noteworthy that mc2 is not a broadcaster, yet it engages local communities with audiovisual streaming facilities as part of a larger package. It enages technologies and processes inherent in internet infrastructure, for instance webcams and satellite imagery, for the benefit of a local, rather than global, community. Mc2 might therefore provide a glimpse of future developments. It is wholly funded by the Victorian Government through the Victorian State Library, and is free to use for all Victorians (source:Vicnet <http://www.mc2.vicnet.net.au>).

The internet is fragmented and inherently internationalised. While projects like mc2 are exploring the internet as a tool to connect Australian communities, internet technologies do not yet provide as coherent a topology as a fixed-frequency call sign for a community to adopt as its own.

A fixed frequency callsign offers a coherent and comprehensible reference for communities to form around.

Where our community can invite you to join us on **TV Channel 31**, the Managing Director of Bigpond TV can only hope -

" you've had an opportunity to look at

<http://info.bigpond.com/cgibin16/DM/y/mzoN0Q1axG0fdX0JeIB0HI> "

(source: email circular from Justin Milne, Bigpond Group Managing Director to Bigpond customers March 2006).

KISS-FM Melbourne is an example of a broadcaster popular in Melbourne during test transmissions but marginalized on an internet stream and three low-power frequencies in the 87 MHz band after it failed to win a permanent community broadcasting license. Clearly, the mix of different frequencies and internet used by Kiss-FM today do not provide the Melbourne community with the sense of community ownership as it has in 3-RRR , 3-PBS, 3-ZZZ, channel 31 TV and other fixed-frequency broadcasters

(source: <http://www.kissfm.com.au>).

Community television has not yet had the opportunity to broadcast a standard definition digital signal.

The success of community radio and television in Melbourne demonstrates that where the community has a strong sense of ownership their community broadcasters thrive. The new communications technologies do not presently offer an environment that fosters a strong sense of community ownership.

Section 3

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

This section discusses the content and programming carried by community broadcasters that reflect the character of Australia and its diversity.

3.1 Content and programming carried by community broadcasters that reflect the character of Australia and its diversity.

Broadcasters often arouse negative feelings of all kinds. The cash for comment scandal in Sydney radio and the nudity scandal surrounding the 2005 series of "Big Brother" are recent cases on point. Broadcasting regulation in Australia is robust enough to deal with those serious issues that sometimes cause community concern over broadcasting standards, as those two examples illustrate.

Australian community broadcasters, while not immune from negative comment, seem to enjoy degrees of respect and support across Australian society that commercial broadcasters cannot buy. Simply put, Australians have embraced their community broadcasters. While there may be diverse opinions on the "proper" role and scope of community broadcasting in Australia, by nature community broadcasters are distinctively independent, offer a diverse range of community views, are inclusive in ways only community groups can be, and enjoy bipartisan support in the Australian parliament.

"The Coalition remains committed to the inclusion of community broadcasters in the digital environment. We will continue to work with the community radio sector in the context of the development of a framework for the introduction of digital radio in Australia. We will also continue to work with the community television sector to develop an appropriate framework for the transition to digital services. This framework will be considered in the context of broader issues relating to digital television, including the process for switching off analogue services."

(source: Election policy SUPPORTING COMMUNITY BROADCASTING Australian Liberal

Party 2004)

"Community broadcasting is vital to the cohesion of local communities, particularly in regional areas. There is a real need for people to know what is happening in their local areas, to share information about their own communities, and to participate in society more broadly. The sector is unique in its capacity to cater for the diverse needs of communities – in particular communities bound by language, culture or ethnicity."

(source: COMMUNICATIONS COMMUNITY BROADCASTING AUSTRALIAN DEMOCRATS ISSUE SHEET 2004)

"Labor regards community radio and community television as an essential component of Australian broadcasting, and will continue to encourage its growth. Community broadcasting provides important services to local communities, particularly in rural, regional and remote areas. Labor supports diversity in community broadcasting recognising that stations meet the needs of many communities, including Aboriginal, ethnic, and print handicapped broadcasters."

(source: ALP National Platform and Constitution Chapter 14)

Australians are naturally inclusive, and have embraced equity and diversity in broadcasting through their community broadcasters. The present regulatory regime appears independent and robust enough to deal properly with community concerns when big business behaves badly, and simultaneously inclusive enough to foster community equity and pride in its own broadcasting efforts. The present regime offers opportunities, diversity, equity and choice in all sectors of broadcasting. Regulation in the community media sector, and attention to community needs in the licensing process by parliament and the regulator is illustrative of Australian preoccupations with egalitarianism, and indicative of the attention Australians pay to concepts of fairness, access, equity and respect for the honest opinions of others.

The productivity commission report into Australian broadcasting lamented the paucity of formal research into the community broadcasting sector. However, the diversity of the community broadcasting sector and the diversity of programming the sector carries as a result of the current regulatory regime are plain for all to see. The Community Broadcasting Foundation has noted that, even in the most remote rural areas, "The production of culturally relevant (community broadcasting) content has been steadily increasing." (source: CBF RIBS TX rollout project press release).

The richness and diversity of Australian communities are reflected in licenses issued to their community broadcasters. Areas of special interest to Australian communities include arts, religion, ethnic, geographic, print handicapped, educational, aboriginal, over-fifties, country and sport, mature age, Torres Straight Islanders, fire music, progressive music, youth and students and ethnic Portugese

(source:ACMA

http://www.acma.gov.au/ACMAINTER.65646:STANDARD:910351364:pc=PC_90042).

Community television licensees, especially in capital cities, are expected to cater for all areas of community interest.

(source:http://www.acma.gov.au/acmainterwr/_assets/main/lib100052/lic007_community_of_interest.pdf)

There are 83 Community TV licensees, predominantly in remote rural areas.

(source:http://www.acma.gov.au/acmainterwr/aba/broadcastserv/broadcasters/documents/lic032_community_tv_broadcasting_licences.pdf)

The growth of the community broadcasting sector during the past three decades illustrates that there is no further need, beyond broad guidelines legislated by an elected Parliament, to compel Australian communities to create programming that reflects their character, or to compel licensees to broadcast them. In Melbourne the demand by community groups for primetime on the community television station far exceeds supply.

The Melbourne Community Television Consortium that operates channel 31 in Melbourne is managed by elected representatives of some 30 community groups and provides opportunities for input to many more. It has a policy of

"providing access to members of our community whose views and concerns are not adequately represented by mainstream television."

(source: Channel 31 Melbourne <http://www.c31.org.au>)

Channel 31-TV in Melbourne has identified those whose views and concerns are not adequately represented in Australian mainstream as predominantly young, indigenous or disabled, and additionally

"The Melbourne Community Television Consortium, either directly or through its member groups, allows, encourages and supports the active participation of those individuals and community groups who would otherwise be denied access to television production and transmission, in its activities and decision making. Such individuals and groups are the constituents of the Consortium."

(source: Channel 31 Melbourne <http://www.c31.org.au>)

and

"The MCTC will, through its Programming Council, ensure that program scheduling acknowledges the needs of local and specific issue communities, of specific groups within the communities, as well as the needs of a general audience. In particular, attention will be paid to the appropriate scheduling of programs with reference to the needs of young people."

(source: Channel 31 Melbourne <http://www.c31.org.au>)

A channel 31 Melbourne daily rundown chosen at random does reflect the character and diversity of Australian culture. The schedule also reflects the Melbourne community's determination to follow through its commitment to the spirit of their broadcaster's charter.

31 Melbourne programming - 13/03/2006

6:30 Cinema

7:00 Beyond their Limits
 7:30 Fun Yoga
 8:00 Spirit of Life
 8:30 Move It Or Lose It
 9:00 Pathways
 9:30 Ken Harris' Masterclass in Oils
 10:00 Movie – Fire over England1
 11:30 Theories of Everything
 12:00 Pinoy News
 12:30 One World - Japan
 13:00 One World – Egyptian Program
 13:30 The Dick Van Dyke Show
 14:00 Bob Cumming Show
 14:30 Vasili's Garden
 15:00 Regional Italian Cuisine
 15:30 Cops and Lawyers
 16:00 Melbourne Musos
 16:30 Pinoy TV Clips
 17:00 Spuds & Duds1
 17:30 Beyond their Limits
 18:00 Visions
 18:30 Vietnamese Program
 19:00 Deaf TV
 19:30 No Limits
 20:00 C News Update
 20:02 Nurse TV
 20:30 Words of Peace
 21:00 Dream On
 21:30 Local Knowledge
 22:00 C News Update
 22:02 Ska TV
 22:15 C News Focus
 22:30 Nat Chat
 23:00 Qview
 23:30 Pathways
 0:00 Regional Italian Cuisine
 0:30 Sri Lanka Morning Show
 1:30 World Music TV
 2:00 Entre Todos
 2:30 At Home with the Baccalas
 3:00 The Italian Connection
 3:30 Fishcam

(source: Channel 31 Melbourne <http://www.c31.org.au>)

Communities in Melbourne are thriving on opportunities to contribute to Australian culture provided by their community TV station. Given the smallest opportunities, Australian communities do create content reflecting their character and diversity.

3.2 Federal Government funding for community broadcasters' programming

Some opportunities for communities to make programs relevant to their interests are created for the community broadcasting sector through Federal funding.

Federal Government funding for community programming is consistent with a broad desire by the parliament to foster Australian culture in electronic media. For example, the appropriation for the Australian Film Commission for film, multimedia and television in 2004/03 was nearly 49 million dollars (source:AFC annual report 2004/05).

In 2004/05 Federal funding to the community broadcasting sector allocated by the community Broadcasting Foundation totalled \$5.5 million, around 4% of the project funding allocated to the arts in Australia by the Australia Council in the same period (source: Australia Council Annual Report 2004/05). Australian communities raised an estimated fifty million dollars in the same period to keep their broadcasters on the air (source CBAA).

The Community Broadcasting Foundation reports that Federal funding was used to assist the operations of the whole sector, including that funding body itself, the sector's peak body, the CBAA, and four hundred and sixty broadcasters (source: CBF annual report 2004/05).

Community television licensees in remote regions receive funding directly from the Department of Infrastructure, Communications and the Arts. Community television broadcasters in the capital cities receive no funding at all.

Culturally relevant content is content that reflects the character of Australia and its diversity. Given that Federal funding for the community broadcasting sector has shrunk by 5% in real terms (source:CBF), while the number of licensed and aspirant community broadcasters has grown significantly, what funding has been invested in the sector by government has provided enormous value in terms of the content relevant to Australian culture that is produced in local communities.

Section 4

This section identifies a threat to achieving a diverse and robust network of community broadcasters.

4.1 Cases against and for the subsidisation of community broadcasters.

As a matter of good public policy governments should not normally directly fund any licensed broadcasters at all. Questions have been raised in the past about the level of indirect government subsidy of broadcasters, particularly the subsidisation of commercial broadcasters during the changeover to digital spectra. The productivity commission noted that the proliferation of community broadcasters is a threat to competition amongst

commercial broadcasters because it restricts the number of commercial licenses available. The commission also reported that the value of license fees foregone through the waiver of fees to community broadcasters is a drain on the public purse.

Experience indicates, however, that the value of the community broadcasting sector is felt in the heart, rather than the hip pocket of the Australian community.

"The community broadcasting sector is unique in the broadcasting industry for its diversity, independence and commitment to providing the community with a platform for expressing views and ideas."

(source: Election policy SUPPORTING COMMUNITY BROADCASTING Australian Liberal Party 2004)

Community radio offers the listening public access to a more diverse range of music, information, news and views than would otherwise be available from commercial or government-based stations. It also provides communities with locally- produced content that is immediately relevant to their daily lives. It allows individuals and community groups to participate in producing their own programs and to maintain their local culture. It also fulfils an important role in providing basic media training for over 7,000 Australians annually.

(source: cultureAndRecreation Australian Government internet portal
<http://www.cultureandrecreation.gov.au/articles/communityradio/>

Almost all of the people who work in community television - writers, presenters, producers, editors, and camera operators - are volunteers. Some people volunteer because they are passionate about the role community television plays in society. Others volunteer to develop the skills associated with television production and to gain important industry experience. Still others volunteer for the sheer enjoyment and thrill of working in television.

(source: cultureAndRecreation Australian Government internet portal
<http://www.cultureandrecreation.gov.au/articles/communitytelevision/>)

It is perhaps a testament to the popularity and unique qualities of community broadcasters in the community that the government funds the community broadcasting sector as it would fund other community recreational focus like a park, garden, swimming pool or community centre.

4.2 Weakness of the present funding system

Broadcasting is subject to far more stringent scrutiny in the community than that ordinarily given to recreational activities.

As a matter of public interest all funding by government for program content should be allocated by a body that is independent of Government to ensure that a licensee or producer is not influenced in any way by the Government as to the programs made or broadcast by a licensee beyond the general terms and conditions of licenses broadly determined by an elected parliament and implemented by an independent statutory body.

Government intervention with respect to licensing for broadcasters should be and is

absolutely fair and equitable. As a matter of good public policy it is seen to be fair, equitable and outside the scope of the ordinary operations of government departments.

Where licensed broadcasters receive government funding it is desirable that such funding be distributed by an independent statutory body. The body notionally charged with fulfilling that role in the community broadcasting sector is the Community Broadcasting Foundation. The Department of Infrastructure Communications Transport and the Arts also distributes funding for programming directly to licensees.

Government intervention with respect to funding for the community broadcasting sector is fragmented and it is difficult to quantify with any certainty the percentage of Federal Government funding that is allocated across the sector to program production. A great deal of the funding provided by the Community Broadcasting Foundation goes toward community broadcasting infrastructure rather than content. Funding for community television in capital cities for content by the Community Broadcasting Foundation and DICTA was zero in 2004/05.

The Community Broadcasting Foundation is governed by a board representative of community radio, the public service, and an additional government appointed representative of DICTA (source: CBF).

It is perhaps desirable to have a DICTA representative on the board of Management of the CBF because so much of the funding distributed in the past by the CBF has been for technology infrastructure, an area in which DICTA has historically shown considerable expertise. But it is clearly in the public interest that funding for cultural activities such as programming be distributed impartially by statutory bodies charged with that purpose, and for funding mechanisms to be seen to be impartial and uninfluenced by government.

If the CBF is to continue distributing government funds for programming it should be restructured, whether through a democratic process or by consultation or appointment, to reflect genuine independence from government in the distribution of those funds.

At present, for example, the CBF acknowledges it is under government instruction not to fund some community television broadcasters. Other anomalies, for instance the DICTA policy of not funding music programs on radio, and making funding conditional upon recipients broadcasting a
govehttp://www.minister.dcita.gov.au/media/media_releases/meeting_the_digital_challenge_reforming_australiasrnment produced program are also cause for concern (source: DICTA funding guidelines). It is in the public interest to have statutory bodies independent of Government fund Australian cultural activities, and that public good is reflected in every aspect of Australian culture except the community broadcasting sector.

If the CBF or DICTA are to continue distributing government finding for program production they should distribute that funding through the Australia Council, Film Commission or other like independent statutory authority charged with nurturing Australian culture so that decisions about which Australian cultural sector, genre or group is excluded from government funding for cultural activities, as the capital city community television licensees are at the moment, can be seen to be independent of government. Anything less provides less than a fair go, the appearance of cronyism, and is ultimately detrimental to, and

uncharacteristic of, the whole of the Australian community.

Section 5

This section summarises our position.

5.1 Summary

The success of community broadcasting in Australia demonstrates that where the community has a strong sense of ownership their community broadcasters thrive. Although there has been some experimentation with new media in the community for a number of years, the new communications technologies require significant inputs of cash and expertise and do not yet offer an environment that fosters a strong sense of community ownership.

Community broadcasting in Australia enjoys broad community and bi-partisan political support. Programming carried by community broadcasters reflects a robust and diverse community based contribution to Australian cultural life that has little or no direct ongoing government funding, low barriers to entry, good regulation, and continuing education and training opportunities. The small amount of government funding that has been invested in the sector has provided enormous value to the Australian community in terms of the content relevant to Australian culture that is produced.

Funding arrangements for the community broadcasting sector are fragmented. They are difficult to quantify with any clarity. They have the appearance of being unfairly administered. If the CBF and DICTA are to continue distributing government finding for program production they should distribute that funding through the Australia Council, Film Commission or like independent statutory authority charged with nurturing Australian culture to prevent perceptions of unfair bias against the community television broadcasters in the capital cities, and to give all community program producers in all broadcast media a fair go.

Steven Middleton
President

on behalf of the elected board of
COMMUNITY MEDIA SERVICES

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