

Submission No. 34

The Secretary,
House of Representatives Standing Committee on
Communications, Information Technology and the Arts
House of Representatives
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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
STANDING COMMITTEE ON
TELECOMMUNICATIONS,
INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY
AND THE ARTS

Dear Sir/Madam/Ms,

The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Communications, Information Technology and the Arts has been requested by the Minister, Senator the Hon. Helen Coonan MP, to inquire into four matters:

- The scope and role of Australian community broadcasting across radio, television, the internet and other broadcasting technologies;
- Content and programming requirements that reflect the character of Australia and its cultural diversity;
- Technological opportunities, including digital, to expand community broadcasting networks; and
- Opportunities and threats to achieving a diverse and robust network of community broadcasters.

I shall primarily address the second, but will touch on the others in so doing. This submission is strictly a personal expression of opinion. The ideas expressed do not reflect the opinion of any entity with which I am associated, in particular the Independent Media Foundation Inc. or the radio program Arts Alive. Necessarily, however, I shall draw from matters experienced through those associations.

Abstract

Community owned and controlled media will assume a more crucial role as a source of news and information for the community as Australia's commercial media amalgamate and globalise, a process given renewed energy with the release of the government's preferred options for media deregulation and the transition to digital transmission modes. However, the present organisational, managerial and financial arrangements constrain the community sector from achieving that potential. The sector is chronically underfinanced and will largely remain so, but will be better able to raise local sponsor-finance when able to offer a mix of quality local and national programs. The production of quality national programs is further constrained by national organisational structures. Alternate structures and procedures are proposed.

Australia's Media-scape 2006

The government has committed itself to the deregulation of public commercial media, minimising restrictions on both cross media ownership and foreign ownership. It has been argued that the new media—especially the Internet—have diversified the sources of information available to the public, and that Australian media companies need access to foreign capital to continue to grow.

However, while retail sources of news and information, especially from overseas, have diversified, reliable wholesale sources of Australian news and information, capable of authentication, have not increased. If anything, with the mergers and take-overs of the past two decades, the numbers of competing news and information sources has contracted. Increasingly too, the retail news and information sources are networked: be it radio or television, Cooma, Canberra and Casio enjoy the same limited choices in commercial and national television and radio as Townsville, Tenterfield and Tumby-Umbie.

In such a circumstance, community media and, in particular, the national community satellite radio service, assumes a social and political importance as a diversified, authentic and independent source for Australian citizens. However, the present organisational, managerial and financial arrangements constrain the community sector from achieving its potential.

The Community Sector

Community radio broadcasters and community television services should be considered separately: a community television service has more the character of a programming and transmission entity, a medium for diversified program-making interests to broadcast their work. Channel 31 in Melbourne is an excellent example of such a consortium: hormone-laden off-road, drag car and four-wheel-drive shows rub shoulders with advocacy programs for the disabled, and aromatic cooking programs from a United Nations of countries.

A community radio station has a much more integrated social and political character, even when there is but one station serving a community, such as is often the case in rural and regional Australia. Rivalry for the single local licence has been noted in numbers of centres including Alice Springs and Narrabri in recent years. In general, radio networking is limited to programs selected from those available on the national community satellite service managed by the Community Broadcasting Association of Australia (CBAA). An exception is stations associated with the Rhema group. While each is financially independent, they share a common philosophy, a play list of music and other content, much sourced overseas. The more financially successful, like 2RFM 99.7 FM serving the central coast of NSW, are virtually commercial operations on community licences.

The community sector is served by two peak organisations the Community Broadcasting Association of Australia and the Community Broadcasting Foundation (CBF). It is the function and operation of these two organisations that must change if 'content and programming ... that reflect the character of Australia and its cultural diversity' is to be delivered and 'a diverse and robust network of community broadcasters' is to be achieved and maintained.

Community Broadcasting Association of Australia

Community Broadcasting Association of Australia was formerly the Public Broadcasting Association of Australia, until the ABC coveted the title of 'public' rather than 'national' broadcaster. Founded in the mid-1970s, in Sydney, it brought to fruition the years-long lobbying of Michael Law and others. Initially they sought the licensing of the private fine-music stations we now recognise by their shared call signs—2MBS, 3MBS etc., but were successful with the introduction of a wider concept of community radio.

The first licences were issued by the then Minister for Post and Communications, the Hon. Tony Staley who became a stalwart of community broadcasting and first chairman of the Community Broadcasting Foundation Ltd.

The CBAA is the collective voice of the broadcasters in the sector, including aspiring broadcasters. It provides support services to its members on a wide range of issues, administers the annual conference and awards, and manages the national community radio satellite service. However, as it is intimately connected financially and politically with the Community Broadcasting Foundation, the CBAA is constrained in what it can say about the policies of the CBF. Though it manages the satellite service it has little editorial control in programming or influence on what programs the CBF funds. While the CBAA may recognise national programming needs it has no direct means to satisfy those needs.

Community Broadcasting Foundation Ltd

The CBF is a company limited by guarantee and operates on a not-for-profit basis. The governance of the CBF is complex. The chair is appointed by the national committee of the CBAA; the minister for communications appoints a member; the other members are nominated by each of the grant advisory committees, whose particular membership is determined annually by the members of the CBAA, and the board of directors itself appoints the deputy chair. Perhaps to balance sectarian interests, the CBF is located in Melbourne. The directors and the grant advisory committee members serve in a voluntary capacity and the organisation employs a small staff. While ideally 'the Foundation's values affirm the principles of Access, Diversity, Independence, Innovation and Localism and the commitment to social justice that underpin the community broadcasting sector's philosophy and operation',¹ the exact nature of the 'voluntary' service has ensured that membership of the board and the committees is near static and unrepresentative of the wider community media sector—workers or listeners—rendering such goals elusive.

Voluntary service

Volunteer workers in the community sector have time to offer for at least these reasons:

- They are retired and have much discretionary time in addition to recreational time, and have some security of income;
- They are unemployed and have much discretionary time in addition to recreational time, and may be in receipt of benefits. One might include 'work for the dole' recipients here;
- They are students or others building entry level experience and skills with the hope of forging a professional career in the media. For them, volunteering often comes at the cost of forgone income but, for some, it is an investment in their future career;
- They are employed in the media generally or the community sector in particular and volunteer either some of their paid time and/or recreational time to serve the sector outside the specific remit of their employment.

¹ 'About the CBF', www.cbf.com.au, sighted 14 March 2006.

The last class has by far the fewest members but they make up most of the members of the board and the committees of the Community Broadcasting Foundation. They are members because they are available and willing as individuals and have the institutional resources to support their membership. While this has produced stability and continuity, it has also deprived the CBF and its advisory committees of refreshment of ideas and, when faced with any challenge to their policy, induced a siege response. Community broadcasting has evolved, but many of the old guard still seek to keep the light of the 1970s paramount on the hill. Like a government, too long in office with little turn-over of membership or of staff, the foundation is deaf to criticism, resistant to change, and inward looking.

CBF Funding

The government's subvention to the CBF goes to meet five general classes of expenditure:

- Technical support and development of stations including transmission costs;
- Subsidies to running costs;
- Program production for the national community radio satellite services;
- CBAA operating costs including satellite administration;
- CBF operating costs.

The existence of the CBF as an 'arms length' funding agency continues principles established by the Coalition government with the creation of the Australian Council for the Arts in 1967. Indeed, 'arms length' funding reflects ideas initiated by the Bloomsbury group in London in the early 20th century about the desirable mechanisms for government subvention in support of arts and cultural endeavours. Such a mechanism has mutual benefits: government is somewhat isolated from controversial decisions and the arts community feels that its creative freedom is not compromised (or little compromised) by fiscal support from government.

As many government departments, including the DCITA, administer grant programs with no question of bias, it is reasonable to ask what of these general classes of expenditure really require the independence of 'arms length' funding? The answer clearly is program production as content is more culture-laden than is infrastructure or operating costs.

Program Production

The Community Broadcasting Foundation, by any measure, has not fulfilled the vision of its founders, as a clearing house for public subvention and private philanthropy and sponsorship for community broadcasting. Its success with private sector sponsorship or philanthropy is non-existent and it now serves solely as an 'arms length' administrator of Commonwealth government subventions. With the exception of program production funding, all areas of present funding administered by the CBF could be administered as well by DCITA or the CBAA.

Program production decisions and program distribution needs to be brought together under one community-based organisation. It may be the CBAA, a reconstructed CBF, or a new organisation. Any new programming organisation would have the following characteristics:

- Its program selection panel(s) would be composed of more than just those people who can afford to be volunteers. Thus members should receive a stipend and have expenses reimbursed;
- The membership of the panel(s) would be refreshed annually;

- As its work will concern program selection and funding, the panel(s) would be available to applicants for face-to-face meetings, and explanations of its decision would be made public;
- The panel(s) might operate on a state-by-state basis to restore a local dimension to national programs, with one representative from each state panel constituting the national panel;
- Individuals employed by stations with vested interests in program under consideration by the panel(s) must declare interest and abstain from the discussion. (There are numbers of examples of a failure to do this under the present system.)
- Benchmark figures per minute of air-time should be established in the interests of equity and to allow potential program makers to budget production proposals. (At present, the range of costs per hour for a current affairs program is \$14,300 to \$31,200 per annum. No explanation for the variation has been forthcoming from the CBF.);
- Areas of program weakness would be identified by the panel(s) and proposals invited from the sector to fill the need;
- Firm and clear selection criteria for program funding would be published;
- There would be a mechanism available to appeal decisions, independent of the initial decision-making panel(s);
- Separate panel(s) would attend to the needs of community television.

Doubtless some will say that such processes are unworkable but there are precedents: the assessment practices of the Experimental Film and Television Fund, the Script Fund, and General Production Fund of the Australia Council in the 1970s are outstanding examples. These practices were employed because the council was aware that these assessment panels were a part of the dialogue with the community of interest that the council served. The benefits in good relations with the sector outweighed the monetary costs.

As the World War I Prime Minister of France, Georges Clemenceau, is believed to have said: 'La guerre, c'est une chose trop grave pour la confier à des militaires', (War is too serious a matter to entrust to the military), national programming of community radio is too important to leave to the long-serving generals of community radio.

One new national community radio programming and distribution service is required and it must look to the communities it serves. It must be catholic in its politics, inclusive in its scope, and multicultural in its tastes. It must afford mechanisms to embrace Indigenous broadcasting, ethnic language broadcasting, and national community broadcasting, allowing the fire walls that presently separate them to dissipate, so to approach an integrated national community radio voice and a national community television vision.

I am available to appear before the standing committee to amplify my remarks.

Yours faithfully,



Vincent O'Donnell MA

16 March 2006