

Submission No:100.....

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.....*Janet Holmes*.....

Submission to the inquiry into the adequacy of radio services in Rural and Regional Australia.

Submitted on behalf of the Crookwell Region Communications Focus Group
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Introduction:

The Crookwell Region Communications Group was convened earlier this year following public meetings to determine the extent of community concern and interest in communications issues. The major concerns of the community are the poor radio, television and mobile telephone coverage within the area, and the high cost of Internet and telephony services. The Crookwell region is within easy travelling distance from both Sydney and Canberra, but, as yet, has not benefited, from a communications perspective, from this proximity. Geographically, the region is very hilly, which makes currently applied line-of-sight communications strategies inefficient and, in some cases, ineffective.

Specific Areas of Concern:

The social benefits and influence on the general public of radio broadcasting in non-metropolitan Australia in comparison to other media sectors.

Many people in the district do not have daily access to newspapers, whether they be the daily metropolitan newspapers, or the twice-weekly local paper. This makes radio and television broadcasts the only source of information. The newspapers are often delivered, with the mail, on a three times a week basis. In some areas of the region, no weekend papers are readily available. Community inquiry has highlighted the fact that many people listen to the radio while working, eg, the farmer has his vehicle's radio on while working in the paddock. Radio is considered to be an efficient means of keeping up-to-date with current affairs, be they local, state, national or international. You don't have to stop being productive to be informed, as you do to read the paper or watch television. Also, if a local emergency arises, it shouldn't matter where a person is, if the radio is on, and the reception is good, notification of the situation occurs. Therefore, it is considered that good radio coverage and reception are vital for this community.

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.

As already mentioned, the terrain in the region is very hilly. As a result, the region is divided into a number of reception areas for radio. For instance, people living in the eastern area receive their radio from Goulburn or Canberra, depending on reception quality, while those in the west receive their radio from Orange, while yet others cannot get any radio reception at all. This situation makes it very difficult for individuals and

families to keep up-to-date with local affairs, particularly in the case of emergencies. For instance, in the case of a major bushfire emergency in the region, many people would be unaware of the situation due to the poor coverage of local radio in the region. This results in a delayed response of the local volunteer fire fighters, as each needs to be individually contacted. The poor local radio coverage also makes it difficult to contact, in emergencies, individuals whose exact whereabouts in the region may be unknown. It also makes it very difficult for local businesses and sporting/community organisations to reach the entire region's audience. Networking of radio programming to cover larger regions locally would have a potentially beneficial effect, therefore, in this region. However, procedures would need to be put in place to ensure even-handedness of coverage. Care needs to be taken to ensure that smaller communities have equal access to coverage compared with larger regional centres. Otherwise, smaller centres would be disadvantaged, and this could lead to decline in the economic and social well-being of these communities. Small communities such as those in the Crookwell region are very dependent on each other to remain vibrant. Hence good communications throughout the region to inform and stimulate social and economic interaction and cohesion are vital.

Potential for new technologies such as digital radio to provide enhanced and more localised radio services to metropolitan, regional and rural areas.

The move from analog to digital communication technology in rural areas, particularly those in hilly terrain, has already been demonstrated to be of questionable benefit. The mobile phone network, which was satisfactory while using analog technology, has proven to be less than satisfactory with the shift to digital technology. The digital signal doesn't travel as well as the analog, therefore the area covered by each tower is less. This has resulted in loss of service to some areas until the extra expense of installing new towers has been met. To us, this does not seem to be either socially or economically sensible. We fear that the wider introduction of digital technologies to radio (and television) will result in similar shortcomings. If digital technology (or similar) is introduced, it is imperative that proper planning take place to ensure quality service (eg reception) is ensured before major disruption to the current system occurs.

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to this inquiry. We look forward to hearing the results of your deliberations.

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