**SUBMISSION TO
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
Standing Committee on Communications, Information Technology and The Arts**

"Tuning in to community broadcasting"

from

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Dear Members of the Committee,

Please find a submission from WARP Inc., as it relates to the terms of reference of the above committee.

I have been delegated to make this submission on behalf of WARP Inc, which is known locally as WARP TV. I will restrict my comments to community television, not radio or community broadcasting in general.

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

We would like to inform the committee of the existence of a small but enthusiastic group of community television producers in the regional centre of Bathurst, NSW. This group, known as "WARP TV" currently produces a weekly half-hour television variety show for TVS (Channel 31) in Sydney and for the national Satellite Community Television (SCTV) service now broadcasting from the Optus B satellite.

"The WARP TV Show" has included, for example, an interview with the local "snake catcher" Peter Carter and an art exhibition about cars held during last year's Bathurst races on Mt Panorama. It has included performances by local musicians, an interview with a man trying (unsuccessfully so far) to get a

development application for Bathurst's first legal brothel through the local council and a day at the local postie bike races. And much more.

Without a local licence to broadcast, WARP TV relies on the satellite service and the Sydney station as its outlets. We are unsure about whether there are any local subscribers to the satellite service and thus, effectively, do not have a local audience for our locally-produced product. Ideally, we would like to see a local community television station transmitting free-to-air to the local community, with a similar footprint to that of the local community radio station 2MCE. We imagine WARP TV would be one of a variety of community groups, including schools and the local university campus, providing programming for such a station.

WARP TV has members who would also be interested in providing programming for internet-based community television, if such opportunities arose, although no steps have yet been taken in this direction.

We believe community television has a variety of important roles:

a) Television-making is currently concentrated in the hands of the few, and it is very expensive. Community television provides **access to the processes and technologies** of television production to a wider layer of people. This can ultimately lead to skills development, job opportunities and other economic benefits, particularly in a regional setting.

b) Community television allows **alternative voices and visions** to be heard and seen. Mainstream television - even the ABC & SBS – must pitch itself to the widest possible audience. Many with niche interests or views - religious, cultural, political - are virtually excluded from mainstream television. Community television can widen out the number of voices that are seen and heard in the media. This ultimately promotes a more robust democracy.

c) Community television can complement local radio, newspapers and the internet in allowing **a particular locality to "speak to itself"**. Mainstream television speaks to a national audience, and regional commercial television stations speak across a region. (In a less and less "grassroots" way, it must be added. For example, Prime Television in Orange used to run programs such as Arts OutWest and Around the Schools which have now been axed). Community television could potentially have a dynamic role in presenting, for example, local theatre productions, sporting activities, council meetings, and so on. In an anonymous world in which community values appear to be fading (witness recent reports of old people dying alone in their homes), measures which use new technologies to promote a sense of community identification and belonging can only be beneficial.

d) **Community television promotes creativity**. In his book, *The Rise of the Creative Class* Richard Florida, using US examples, shows that creative communities are also ultimately prosperous communities. This is a point echoed in a slightly different way in the book *Art and Wellbeing* by Australian authors Deborah Mills and Paul Brown. We believe that promoting the arts (in this case the video arts) and creativity are essential to building healthy, prosperous communities. This is particularly important for rural and regional areas suffering from long-term decline.

On a slightly different note and speaking personally, I have been involved in both the mainstream media and community media for the past 15 years or so. I would say my work for the mainstream media (as a suburban and regional newspaper reporter and as a regional television reporter) has been a highly structured, formulaic and "self-censored" experience. In contrast, my experience of community television has been one of the free flow of ideas and creative techniques, without fear of upsetting advertisers or having to stick to formulae. It's the sort of experience one has as a student. In a wealthy democracy such as ours, such opportunities should be available throughout life. Such opportunities benefit both individuals and society as a whole.

As a concluding remark in this section, I'd like to paraphrase that wonderful speech by Edward R. Murrow, as reproduced in George Clooney's recent movie *Good Night and Good Luck*. Murrow makes the point that television is one of the most extraordinary inventions of the twentieth century. It has enormous potential to educate, to entertain and to promote empathy and understanding in our increasingly complicated world. However, television is increasingly about just one of these potentials - entertainment - at the expense of all the others. WARP TV believes that community television has the potential to help this particular form of media to better fulfil its other potentials.

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

With its small, predominantly English- speaking population, Australia has always relied heavily on British and US television programming. This situation can be ameliorated through affirmative action that protects the production and broadcasting of Australian-made programs. This can be done through a quota system, but we believe that it can also be achieved through supporting a robust community television sector. By putting cameras, editing equipment and air-time into the hands of community groups, we can hear their voices directly, whatever they are - Arabic boys in western Sydney, amateur theatre practitioners in rural and remote areas, trout fishermen, Aboriginal groups, people with disabilities, church groups. Such grassroots production will inevitably reflect experiences that are uniquely Australian, simply because they are made here and involve local people.

Promoting grassroots local production is essential for community television in this country, but we are also aware that there are many culturally and linguistically diverse groups in Australia which would like air-time for productions from their own countries of origin. WARP TV believes that devoting some air-time to such programming is reasonable, as it honours the diversity of culture within Australia.

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

As a group of on-the-ground producers, we are not experts in the field of recent technological advances in broadcasting. However, we can make the point that technological advances are making it ever-easier to produce broadcast-quality programming at low cost. Digital video cameras are now in the financial reach of many households, as are computers with enough memory to cope with digital editing. Running a television station was once an extremely expensive exercise. Technologically, it is now possible to run a TV station from a computer in someone's room, drawing on low-cost "household" production for programming.

We can see that the internet is increasingly another way to get video productions "out there" and there are many groups beginning to take this up. (WARP TV has not been involved in this itself.) We would, however, like to say that getting onto "the box" in people's living rooms is still preferable to an internet presence. Free-to-air television does not have to be sought out, as does an internet site. People can just stumble upon it as they flick through the channels on their remote controls. This gives community television a presence along with the big players. In terms of getting a large audience, this is still the preferred model. In Australia it is an option that remains unavailable outside of those cities with Channel 31 licences.

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

The main opportunity for achieving a robust network of community broadcasters is the increasingly low cost of the production technology, as outlined above.

The main threat resides in the regulatory and policy framework now in place in Australia. For example, WARP Inc. has taken some of the first steps in the direction of getting a local Channel 31 licence and we hope we are ultimately successful. This community has talent and skills, a local university campus (CSU) with a journalism department, a TAFE campus with a lively digital media section and even a transmitter now languishing in someone's back yard. All we lack is a licence to put the transmitter on top of Mt Panorama and switch it on! However, the onerous requirements for getting a licence have caused us to wonder whether it will be worth going through all the effort to apply, only to be knocked back. A "friendlier" application system, flowing from a policy that actively

promotes community television, would be encourage us to believe that we may be able to achieve the goal of a local community television station.

While we have not actually experienced this, we believe another potential threat is the response of existing commercial interests to community television. In Bathurst, for example, we would certainly be asking local businesses and organizations for sponsorship as a way of defraying costs. This could be perceived as a threat by local newspapers and radio stations that are also approaching the same businesses for advertising. However, we believe that in our own local case we could ultimately work through such issues as a community, creating a win-win situation for the community as a whole.

A similar situation could conceivably play out on a national scale, with existing media corporations perceiving a threat to their own interests coming from an expansion of the community television sector. However, we believe such commercial interests must be balanced against the benefits of promoting community television.

Current changes in cross-media ownership are widely seen as leading to an increasing concentration in ownership of the media. Looking at the situation locally, there has been speculation about the possibility of Rural Press (which owns the *Western Advocate*, Bathurst's daily newspaper) taking control of Prime TV, one of the local regional commercial television stations. This would effectively mean a big chunk of local news coming from just one commercial player. An expanded role for community television could act, in a small way, to counteract the tendency to greater media ownership concentration.

CONCLUSION
We believe that a robust community television sector in Australia will promote skills development and job opportunities, community solidarity, an outlet for alternative voices, the promotion of uniquely Australian culture in the media and the general promotion of creativity and empowerment within the population. Technological advances have made it possible for community television programs to be made at low cost. All that is needed is a regulatory, policy and funding environment more conducive to community television.

Thank you for considering our submission.

Yours sincerely,

Tracy Sorensen
Secretary
WARP Inc.