



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

Official Committee Hansard

**HOUSE OF
REPRESENTATIVES**

STANDING COMMITTEE ON COMMUNICATIONS, TRANSPORT
AND THE ARTS

Reference: Adequacy of radio services in non-metropolitan Australia

MONDAY, 12 MARCH 2001

DARWIN

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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
STANDING COMMITTEE ON COMMUNICATIONS, TRANSPORT AND THE ARTS
Monday, 12 March 2001

Members: Mr Neville (*Chair*), Mr Gibbons, Mr Hardgrave, Mr Jull, Mr Lindsay, Ms Livermore, Mr McArthur, Mr Mossfield, Mr Murphy, and Mr St Clair

Members in attendance: Mr Gibbons, Mr Hardgrave, Mr Jull, Mr Mossfield, Mr Neville and Mr St Clair

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

To inquire into and report on the adequacy of radio services in regional and rural Australia and the extent to which there is a need for the Government to take action in relation to the quantity and the quality of radio services in regional and rural Australia, having particular regard to the following:

- The social benefits and influence on the general public of radio broadcasting in non-metropolitan Australia in comparison to other media sectors;
- Future trends in radio broadcasting, including employment and career opportunities, in non-metropolitan Australia;
- 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, and;
- The potential for new technologies such as digital radio to provide enhanced and more localised radio services in metropolitan, regional and rural areas.

WITNESSES

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Committee met at 8.03 a.m.

CHAIR—I declare open this public hearing of the House of Representatives Communications, Transport and Arts Committee inquiry into the adequacy of radio services in regional Australia. The inquiry has generated strong interest across Australia. We have received approximately 270 submissions. They have come from relevant Commonwealth and state departments, statutory bodies, peak industry associations, commercial networks, independent broadcasters and the community radio sector, shire councils, SES services and many individuals.

The importance of radio service in regional Australia cannot be underestimated. For many people it is their first source of information at times of flood, bushfire, cyclones or other emergency situations. It plays a critical role in relaying information to those affected by the crisis. It is highly valued for entertainment. It is portable and it is relatively inexpensive. But, more than this, radio has qualities of immediacy and intimacy, which are quite unique to it as in no other medium. These qualities are central to any account of its value. That is what this inquiry is all about.

Changes in the regulatory environment brought about by the Broadcasting Services Act 1992, together with technological developments, have led to substantial changes in the ownership and delivery of radio services in regional Australia. It is clear from submissions that there is considerable concern about these developments. The issues that have been raised are many and varied, but they include the impact of these changes on three areas: first, the broadcast of timely and accurate information in emergency situations; second, the commercial viability of broadcasters; and, third, the localism of programming.

In addition to these issues we have heard evidence about reception difficulties in various areas. I know that significant issues for the Northern Territory and Western Australia are: the role and value of ABC radio services; and the value of and challenges facing the community radio sector. The committee commenced the second stage of its inquiry, namely, the public hearing stage, in December last year. We have had public hearings in Logan, Long Reach, Townsville, Tamworth, Bathurst, Melbourne and Canberra.

Today we are in Darwin and, as I said earlier, we are looking forward to receiving additional information to pick up the flavour of what is happening in the Northern Territory and Western Australia. I am conscious this morning that some of the witnesses involved have travelled great distances to be with us. I appreciate that very much. To commence these proceedings today I call Ms Joe Bryson to the table.

BRYSON, Ms Jo, Acting Chief Executive Officer, Office of Communications, Science and Advanced Technology

CHAIR—Welcome.

Ms Bryson—I have some handouts to give to members of the committee.

CHAIR—We will authorise those at the end of your evidence. Would you like to give us a five-minute overview of your submission?

Ms Bryson—Yes, certainly.

CHAIR—Then we will ask questions. This was originally a series of overheads, was it not?

Ms Bryson—Yes.

CHAIR—Would you like to take us through those, or would you just like to make an opening statement?

Ms Bryson—No, I would love to take you through those. Mr Chairman, I certainly agree with your opening statements. I stress the importance of radio for people living in the Territory. Just taking you through these, it is important to understand the demographics of the Northern Territory and how that affects delivery of services. Whilst we have 16 per cent of Australia's landmass we have only one per cent of Australia's population. Therefore, the economies of scale that you would see in other areas of Australia just are not there. That has a wide bearing in relation to the delivery of services.

I would also like to draw your attention to the fact that 24 per cent of the population within the Northern Territory live in very remote areas. We also have a large proportion of indigenous people, which takes into account the need for special and tailored services to areas in the Northern Territory. The fourth slide brings to your attention a study that has been completed by the University of Adelaide, which measures remoteness. Their definition of remoteness relates to the accessibility of goods, services and opportunities for social interaction, all of which I think are aspects of radio.

No area in the Northern Territory is considered to be highly accessible to goods, services and opportunities for social interaction. The central business district and the suburbs of Darwin are seen to be accessible. Greater Darwin itself, which includes the rural area, is moderately accessible, and the rest of the Territory is remote or very remote. Even our second-largest business area, Alice Springs, is still considered to be remote compared with the rest of Australia. I think that puts this presentation into context.

Access to quality radio broadcasting is extremely important. It is important for indigenous education and development. It is important for regional and community development. It is an important aspect for tourism when we have tourists who spend a lot of time on Territory roads

sightseeing the Territory. It is important not just from a social point of view but also from the point of view that local information about events and road conditions can be used to deliver education, provide health and allied health information and also assist in the provision of emergency services.

Radio services are important because the Australian does not get to Darwin until at least midday. Quite frequently it is offloaded. So the national newspapers, such as the *Australian Financial Review* and the *Australian*, do not reach Darwin until halfway through the day. So radio is an important avenue for getting information about national events. In the more remote areas those newspapers arrive much later. The further you get from the Darwin area the more delay there is. So even national newspapers may not reach homesteads or, if they do, they are in a package, and they are reaching them one week or so later.

Radio services, therefore, contribute to lessening the social, cultural and economic disadvantages of living in remote and very remote areas. The people who do not have access to the theatre and have to drive several thousand kilometres to access those services really need access to radio for information, education and entertainment. It is a responsive media outlet and it is something that you have. As news breaks it is provided to you, a la the example that we have in national newspapers. So for very remote locations it is a significant source of information and entertainment.

There are also other advantages of radio over other media. It is portable and cheaper to run. It can be run off batteries, which is not necessarily the case with television. It is a more reliable source of information. It does not necessarily have any political spins on it. It can be tailored to target specific geographical and cultural groups. In particular, broadcasts in Aboriginal and other ethnic languages are important in the preservation of culture and assisting in building a community's self-esteem. Generally, it is non-political and factual. It is probably the easiest of all media to re-establish or keep going during cyclones and other disasters. That is important for the Territory, particularly the Top End.

I have covered the aspect of print media. It also has an advantage—and this is important when we are dealing with our indigenous communities—over print media in areas where there is a low literacy rate or a high incidence of chronic eye disease. I would like now to draw attention to the slides on page 5, which are related to coverage of the radio broadcasts in the Northern Territory. The value of radio broadcasting increases the further the distance you have to travel, and in particular for off-road travel. So for that reason we are saying that the length of highway coverage is not sufficient. But we are asking for border-to-border coverage.

On the very last page of the slides you will see a diagrammatic representation of stations. These are intended to provide you with details in regard to the locality and the number of national commercial AM and FM stations that are being received. You will notice that there is sporadic coverage down the Stuart Highway, which is the backbone running down the Northern Territory. Once you leave Katherine there is basically no coverage through to Western Australia. Once you leave Tennant Creek or Three Ways there is basically no coverage on the Barclay through to Queensland. There is coverage at Yulara but very little coverage from Alice Springs south and then on the Lasseter Highway.

So the highways do not have coverage but, once off road, there is even less coverage as well. In relation to future trends, we considered that syndication has an important part to play, although offset against that is obviously the need for local community news, et cetera. But they can provide a range of services and the connection between metropolitan and non-metropolitan Australia. They can also provide national and international programs to remote access areas. We in the Northern Territory government spend a fair amount of money proportionately in supporting radio and television broadcasts.

The Office of Communications, Science and Advanced Technology actually manages the retransmission site on top of NT House and a number of retransmission sites across the Territory. We also support TOP FM and the Territory Network. We fund and lease lines to enable small community radio broadcasting to continue by providing that content delivery. It also takes its content delivery from the House when the Legislative Assembly is sitting. It would be fair to say that you would not have as many triangles on this slide if the Northern Territory government did not provide that support.

The Northern Territory government recognises that that is not necessarily the role of state and Territory governments to enable people to have access to content and information. So the Territory community radio stations play an important role, not just in delivering local news but also in providing training and employment opportunities. There are no certified courses in the Northern Territory but community radio does provide on-the-job training to volunteer broadcasters and broadcasters whose native tongue is not English and, therefore, they can deliver ethnic programs.

I am conscious of the time, but I would like to stress that, regardless of geographic isolation, Territorians are entitled to the same quality and variety of service as any other Australian, including digital radio. We have three slides of recommendations. We have an idea of where our radio black spots are, but we think it is timely for the Territory government to be funded to determine the full extent of signal propagation and where those black spots are in relation to border coverage, given the importance of radio. We believe that border-to-border coverage is important.

We believe that federal government support for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation is extremely important and should be maintained; that the Australian Broadcasting Corporation is an important provider of high-quality local news and current affairs. We believe that there is scope for Federal funding to assist broadcasters, in particular community radio, and that that radio outlet enables people from non-English-speaking backgrounds and indigenous groups to receive news and local content in their native language. We also believe that there is scope for funding for indigenous local radio to be increased and to provide it with expertise and training, not just in new technologies but in areas such as financial management and management of radio stations. We see that as quite an issue.

We deal with that as an operational base in the Territory. We have direct exposure to that area. We believe that a competitive television environment has successfully provided choice for consumers and that could immediately be put into place in community radio and commercial radio broadcasting.

CHAIR—Thank you for the overheads and for that fine map at the back, which gives us a bit of a feel for where your various transmitters are. I was listening to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation this morning. Does the ABC have a separate regional program for each area of the Territory? For example, is there an ABC station at Alice Springs? Does it do its own breakfast program, or does everything come out of Darwin?

Ms Bryson—You are asking me a technical question about programming.

CHAIR—I do not ask that question to be difficult.

Ms Bryson—I understand that.

CHAIR—The reason I ask that question is that one of the complaints made about commercial radio related to the contraction of services and networking out of a hub of pseudo local programs. I just wondered what the situation was in regard to the ABC in the Territory.

Ms Bryson—I think that the ABC has some local programming in Alice Springs, that is, in a regional content. I am not sure about the extent of that.

CHAIR—Have you ever done a survey of the Territory to identify these black spots?

Ms Bryson—We have a list of transmission sites and we can map that against our known communities. But I cannot tell you how far the signal is received from those sites and I do not know whether we are able to actually map border-to-border coverage.

CHAIR—I do not think there is anywhere in Australia that has border-to-border coverage. Even in Tasmania, there are always pockets of remoteness or difficult transmission. I think the principle is to get as much radio coverage to as many people as possible.

Ms Bryson—Yes.

CHAIR—Have you ever had discussions with the ABA on how services might be improved? Have they done surveys of the Territory?

Ms Bryson—I am not aware whether or not they have done surveys of the Territory.

CHAIR—But would that not be fundamental? You have done surveys about the black spots in radio in the Northern Territory. The ABA is the licence-issuing authority. If you do not connect with them you will not even be at starting point. You will not reach ground zero.

Ms Bryson—We do connect with the ABA. However, it tends to be on a problem basis and it tends to be looking at service.

CHAIR—Not on a priority basis?

Ms Bryson—Not at this stage, no. The Northern Territory government does what it possibly can in the area.

CHAIR—We will be talking to the ABA. We would like to hear what you think the ABA should be doing.

Ms Bryson—I would like to see as much coverage as I possibly can across the Northern Territory for different reasons—the obtaining of social and cultural information in relation to programming. When you get to the northern part of the Territory there are some important aspects relating to the accessing of radio stations during the cyclone season and the wet season. In fact, OCSAT has been proactive in alerting every council within 250 kilometers of the coastline about recent black spot funding from the ABC in regard to the second transmission site that they are offering under black spot funding.

When I say that OCSAT is proactive, it is an extremely small department. It has 12 people to manage a whole range of things—not just radio and television. We probably have the equivalent of one full-time person dealing with radio and television issues. So we have to look at where we can best put that energy. At the moment, that energy is best put into alerting communities to opportunities such as ABC black spot funding for cyclones, and working with them to get as much coverage as we possibly can.

Mr HARDGRAVE—Do you actually want more stations, or do you want the current range of stations within the Territory translated to other places, or relayed to other places?

Ms Bryson—I do not think we are specific in the solution. We would just like to see as much programming made available as possible.

Mr HARDGRAVE—Have you done any work done in the content of those stations as they currently exist? The reasoning for your cyclone season service is sound, but the reality may be different from your aspirations. In other words, the ABC is coming out of Sydney at night. Is that relevant to what is happening somewhere else?

Ms Bryson—My understanding is that, if there is a cyclone alert, local information is provided. I use as an example an instance last year which actually involved television. Some content was being provided for relay out of Brisbane. I think it was during the process of Cyclone Steve. The cyclone watch in Queensland was cancelled but, as that cyclone moved to the Northern Territory, we went on alert and we became aware of the fact that broadcasters were actually saying that the cyclone watch had been cancelled because it was being picked up from Brisbane. But in actual fact the cyclone watch was just being put on.

Mr HARDGRAVE—So, in other words, currently within the Territory there are radio services, a range of personnel and a commitment to ensuring localism, particularly in times of natural disaster?

Ms Bryson—From a radio station point of view, the ABC would be doing that, yes.

Mr HARDGRAVE—What about commercial operators? You have some professional commercial operators who are into localism in a big way and who maintain offices in various markets. One of those operators is presenting a submission this morning. Obviously they are also a ready point of access during times of emergency?

Ms Bryson—That would be true. My understanding though is that, as a result of the investigation we did about the Cyclone Steve incident, the ABC is regarded as the national broadcaster and that is the station to stay tuned to.

Mr HARDGRAVE—So the ABC is regarded as the best source of information during those times?

Ms Bryson—Yes.

Mr HARDGRAVE—And you are saying that it is not heard sufficiently through the Territory to actually provide the sort of service that it can in some parts? Is that what you are saying?

Ms Bryson—Yes.

Mr MOSSFIELD—You referred earlier to black spots. You are seeking more funding to identify where those black spots are. Is that where you are coming from?

Ms Bryson—We are saying that that would be useful, yes.

Mr MOSSFIELD—What would you then do once you established where those black spots were? What would be your solution to that lack of coverage in those areas?

Ms Bryson—We would need to look at who was providing adjacent services and whether there was a technical solution to extend those services. You would obviously need to start negotiations with a national broadcaster and talk to relevant sections of the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts. The point that I would like to make is that there has been a recognition of the need for black spot funding for television from the second sale of Telstra. Apart from the current application from the ABC for cyclone-affected areas it does not appear to have had the same programs for black spot funding in radio, to my knowledge. I do not want to sound ignorant about radio if I am unable to answer some of the questions. I apologise for that. The office is a small office. We manage a whole range of issues from science and innovation to putting broadband telecommunications into remote communities. We have 14 people—two in Alice Springs, and 12 in Darwin. So our resources are stretched and our knowledge is at a strategic level.

Mr MOSSFIELD—I do not know whether my next question is appropriate, but would the government be looking at new technology such as the satellite digital broadcasting to overcome that? Are you aware of ASIAPACE in Melbourne, which is providing satellite coverage for just about all Australia? They have what they say is a relatively inexpensive receiver that could be purchased. Are you aware of that technology?

Ms Bryson—We are certainly aware of the role that satellite plays, because we are involved in putting satellite solutions into remote communities. I am not aware of that particular firm. I would like details of that.

Mr MOSSFIELD—All right.

Mr ST CLAIR—Could you give me a rough guide of the size of the Territory we are talking about? You referred earlier to the Queensland border and to Three Ways. Have you any idea roughly what distance that is? If you do not know, that is fine. I just wanted an idea.

Ms Bryson—I would say about 600 kilometres.

Mr ST CLAIR—Is it about the same from Katherine across the Top End to Western Australia?

Ms Bryson—Yes. I think Katherine is about 500 kilometres.

Mr ST CLAIR—And there is virtually nothing for those two? I notice on your map that there is nothing at all?

Ms Bryson—No.

Mr ST CLAIR—Are there communities along there at all, or are they situated elsewhere?

Ms Bryson—No. There are communities at Tennant Creek and there are communities along Victoria Highway. There are also communities at Timber Creek. There are certainly parts of the Territory where there is no off-road travel and no communities. But the point that I make is that it is more than just along the highways. The Territory is regarded as an area that is conducive to off-road tourist travel, similar to the northern parts of Western Australia.

Mr JULL—It would seem from your submission and from some of the other submissions that we have received that overall Territorians are fairly happy about the localism of Australian radio. We do not seem to have the argument here that we do in other areas where networking has completely wrecked localism. Were you ever approached about requirements for greater local content? People seem to be reasonably happy with the situation.

Ms Bryson—If you take into account Maslow's hierarchy of needs you will know that, when you are down at the bottom, you are grateful for what you have.

Mr JULL—I turn now to community radio. In your submission you stressed the requirement for a greater development of community radio. What is your definition of community radio? Are you talking principally about some of these remote communities being covered? Are you speaking principally about Aboriginal services or about what seems to have developed in other areas of Australia where a community station can almost become a pseudo additional commercial station?

Ms Bryson—I think it is fair to say that there are two aspects to community radio. One is to be found in the definition of the act itself. We have three community broadcasters in the Territory who fall into the strict definition of the act. We have been careful and we have talked to people like the ABA, et cetera, to determine the extent to which the Territory government can be involved in assistance. That links to Territory Network as well, because of some of the definitions about government involvement in the act. There is another aspect of community radio. Local radio content relates specifically to the communities themselves.

Mr JULL—But, basically, you are looking at more than just a service that provides some country and western music and a few local advertisements?

Ms Bryson—Yes. I think you will probably hear from the TOP FM people about the importance of ethnic broadcasting.

Mr JULL—So TOP FM is a fully-fledged community station?

Ms Bryson—Yes.

Mr JULL—I think, from memory, that you paid tribute to their training programs. Does that training program pertain only to their services out of Darwin, or can that extend to other areas throughout the Territory?

Ms Bryson—That would probably be a question better answered by them. My impression is that it is out of Darwin, but I know it links in. Last week in Katherine the Telstra feed was not going through, so OCSAT became involved in getting that back into programming content. So certainly they have satellite stations as well.

Mr JULL—Do you have any difficulty with some community stations starting up and virtually collapsing?

Ms Bryson—That has been a problem, yes, and that is why I think we made some specific references not just to technical and programming training but also to financial and station management training.

Mr JULL—Is it fair to say that those stations are mainly in remote communities, or do you have difficulties with that?

Ms Bryson—No, some of those are Darwin based.

Mr JULL—They are Darwin based as well?

Ms Bryson—Yes.

CHAIR—Have you ever done a survey of the listening habits of Darwin or the Territory in general? What percentage of people, for example, listen to the ABC? What percentage of people listen to the run-of-the mill radio? What percentage of people listen to the HOTFM type programming?

Ms Bryson—No, we have not.

CHAIR—Is that not fundamental? You said that the ABC does all the cyclone bushfire-type work. If the Territory follows the pattern which is evident in other parts of Australia, about 80 per cent of listeners are listening to commercial radio.

Ms Bryson—Yes.

CHAIR—One of the things that we have picked up around the rest of Australia—to our surprise I might add—has been the number of occasions on which SES and emergency-type services have broken down through commercial radio. Do you have any comment on that? I can understand you having a strategy from the ABC because of its integrated coverage. I cannot profess to speak for the Northern Territory. People might know that when there are emergency situations they have to swing straight to the ABC. But it seems to me that if 80 per cent or more people are listening to commercial radio that integration needs to move right across commercial radio as well.

Ms Bryson—I do not think I can speak for emergency services and how they provide that information. My presentation today is based on actual instances in which we have been involved over the last two years.

CHAIR—There are zealots who never turn on the ABC and there are zealots of the ABC who never turn on commercial radio, as we all know.

Ms Bryson—Yes.

CHAIR—I just wonder how you handle that in a Territory context. You are probably the most cyclone prone part of Australia. You also have your fair share of bushfires and floods. I just wondered whether there was an integrated program, either at the state emergency service level or at the government level, that coordinates these things?

Ms Bryson—There is an integrated program that coordinates emergency services. I refer to the incident that we had to investigate last year or the year before. Having spoken to a whole range of emergency people, et cetera, the end result was that the definitive program was the ABC. I can only go on that evidence.

Mr JULL—You had that cyclone debacle with the ABC, but have you ever experienced a similar situation with commercial stations, to your knowledge? Has there ever been an emergency when the commercial stations in the Territory did not or could not react?

Ms Bryson—Sorry, that instance was a commercial station. It was not the ABC; it was a commercial station. So, as a result of that, and as a result of our investigations, we were told to advise the individual to listen to the ABC.

CHAIR—Was that a hubbed station, a 24-hour a day or a 12-hour a day station? If you do not know, could you get back to us with that information?

Ms Bryson—Yes.

CHAIR—That is also central.

Ms Bryson—Yes.

CHAIR—We have heard evidence about warnings going to commercial stations that have been hubbed over weekends and about staff coming into those stations on Monday morning

only to find the fax machines full of emergency announcements, not one of which had gone out to the districts.

Mr HARDGRAVE—I want to explore some of the matters that you have just raised. Who wrote this submission? Did you write this submission? Did you state that inquiries in relation to it should be directed to you?

Ms Bryson—My staff wrote the submission.

Mr HARDGRAVE—I refer to pages 9 and 10 of your submission. The last paragraph on page 9 states:

The Commonwealth Government should review ongoing budget restraints being placed on the ABC.

What are those budget restraints? The only time that the current Commonwealth government has made any cut to the ABC budget was in the August 1996 budget. It has given additional funds for digital television telecasts. I want to know what the Northern Territory government's source of information is for that statement. On page 10 of your submission we find:

Of particular concern is that available funds could be allocated to enabling new technologies...

Your submission then refers to the 'significant funding cuts to the ABC announced in October.' What were those significant cuts to the ABC which were announced in October? To my knowledge nothing was announced in October last year. I refer to the next paragraph which states:

...the ABC provides the most comprehensive service for most Territorians. This fact, coupled with the ABC's high editorial and programming standards in news and current affairs, makes it a vital source of information, the impact of which should not be diminished by undue financial restraint.

These statements are made in the Northern Territory government's submission. I have to say, Ms Bryson, that I do not know from where those viewpoints have come.

CHAIR—Could you come back to us on that?

Ms Bryson—My copy of the submission does not have that statement on page 10. But I will come back to you.

CHAIR—The statements are to be found on the second half of pages 9 and 10.

Ms Bryson—My pages 9 and 10 have 'Future trends in radio broadcasting and certified broadcasters.'

Mr HARDGRAVE—The statement is to be found on the page prior to that, at dot point 2.4, Observations. It is the last part of that paragraph. I raised this issue because it is the Northern Territory government's submission and these statements, which I do not believe are based on any facts, need to be clarified. Moreover, I would like to know what is the basis of those statements.

Ms Bryson—Yes.

CHAIR—We would be interested to know, for example, why the ABC was cut back in the Territory and not elsewhere.

Mr HARDGRAVE—That is what I would like to know. That is why I raised the issue.

Ms Bryson—Sure, that is okay.

Mr HARDGRAVE—If there have been cutbacks to ABC operations in the Northern Territory that does not surprise me, and I am sure that it would not surprise any member of this committee. One of the other things that we have found during the course of this inquiry is that the ABC tends to hire in Sydney first and fire everywhere else first. It does not want to maintain services in rural and regional areas. So if you can actually qualify what is meant by these observations, it may assist the committee in its deliberations.

Ms Bryson—Sure. I can certainly get back to you on that one.

CHAIR—As I said earlier, if you have an integrated system of emergency networking, we would like to know. How do the emergency services break into commercial programming? That is a common theme throughout Australia—the inability to have some clear-cut method of integrating emergency services. We had one case of someone ringing the hubbed station—I think it was in Sydney—to be told by the station that she should ring the local SES, which really stunned us.

Ms Bryson—Okay.

CHAIR—Just coming back to community radio, the Commonwealth government provides two national broadcasting services, the ABC and the SBS.

Ms Bryson—Yes.

CHAIR—Do you have an SBS radio station here?

Ms Bryson—I am not aware. We may have. They certainly do not use our retransmission sites. We have SBS television, yes.

CHAIR—I recognise your map and your overheads, but if you go to your map and you look at the biography at the bottom you see that it refers to FM National. It does not break them up into components. Then it refers to AM National. Presumably there would be at least two services. Presumably the AM is the regional and the FM is Triple J, Radio National or FM, the Fine Music network. Are the four ABC services fairly comprehensively distributed amongst the Territory?

Ms Bryson—No. For instance, regional centres like Katherine do not receive Triple J.

CHAIR—What about FM and RM?

Ms Bryson—It would have to be broken down further. I have a list of licensees from the ABA. I was actually going to break that down further, and put each radio station on that map. I can get back to you with that information.

CHAIR—We also had evidence at Longreach. You might like to comment on this. I suppose generically we have this evidence. We have evidence from RG Capital along similar lines. If you continue to provide more and more licences, if you create an overabundance of licences of particular types you will end up with an insufficient commercial avoirdupois in any market for anyone to make a living.

Ms Bryson—Yes.

CHAIR—There have been criticisms about Triple J going into Longreach, which I imagine would have similar a similar sort of ambience to parts of the Territory. I might add that it was not put in by the ABC. The ABC made the signal available to a retransmission community group. It ran the risk of crippling the small, modern music FM station that was operating. I cannot remember whether it was HOTFM. We have also received evidence, for example about Mackay, which has a population of 80,000 and four radio stations. I am not sure whether they are all on air, but four radio stations are licensed. What does your department think about the balancing of this? You say that you have not got Triple J, but does that put the local HOTFM off the air in Katherine if you do put it on? Do you end up with any more networked services?

Ms Bryson—This whole question was what I was alluding to when I referred to economies of scale. You have 130,000 people in Darwin and 60,000 or so out in the rest of the Territory. It is an issue that we face with telecommunications as well. When you attract competition, be it a national broadcaster or a commercial broadcaster, you water down the commercial ability and you end up with very little. You end up with no-one getting anywhere, and everybody withdrawing if you are not careful. So that is an issue.

CHAIR—I thought you said that the policy of your department was to be strategic?

Ms Bryson—Our policy, yes.

CHAIR—If you are going to be strategic you cannot just be strategic geographically. You have to be strategic in the volume and style of services.

Ms Bryson—Absolutely. That would be based on need and the requirements of the local community. So we have made representations on behalf of Katherine to get Triple J. Now the Northern Territory government provides retransmission sites for a number of areas to enable constituents to receive television and radio according to their requirements and their needs.

CHAIR—How much does your department spend each year on retransmissions?

Ms Bryson—We spend over half a million on retransmission sites. For a department with a budget of about \$2.5 million, that is a lot.

CHAIR—About 20 per cent of your budget goes on retransmission? Ms Bryson yes.

Mr MOSSFIELD—How many broadcasting points would there be throughout the Territory, both ABC and commercial? Would you know that? When I say broadcasting points I mean where they have production, where journalists are on site?

Ms Bryson—I think it would be two—Alice and Darwin. I may be wrong but I think it is two.

Mr MOSSFIELD—That would be for the ABC? Two for the ABC, one in each location?

Ms Bryson—Yes.

Mr MOSSFIELD—And what about commercial?

Ms Bryson—Darwin and Alice Springs. There is a commercial station I think. Certainly it takes TOP FM broadcasting into Katherine and probably Tennant Creek. Then there would be a presence at Yulara and Jabiru, but I think they are retransmission sites.

Mr MOSSFIELD—Would the government have any idea of how many people are employed in the radio industry throughout the Territory?

Ms Bryson—We could find that out for you.

Mr MOSSFIELD—It would be interesting to know the numbers and possibly the break up.

Ms Bryson—We could find that out for you.

Mr MOSSFIELD—You make some reference in your submission to regulations. Do you think that regulations for regional radio licences should differ, say, from licences for metropolitan areas? Are there different issues involved?

Ms Bryson—Certainly different issues relate to economies of scale in funding and to content delivery percentages and other things. I think it is tailoring service provision to need and capability.

Mr MOSSFIELD—What about issues such as commercial viability and local content? Should there be regulations in the act governing those issues when licences are issued? Should those issues be taken into consideration?

Ms Bryson—I think commercial viability and management capability are certainly important when establishing licences. My opinion is that that has not necessarily been looked at to the level that it should have been looked at, particularly in community radio.

CHAIR—I refer again to community radio. You have in Australia the national broadcasters—the ABC and the SBS.

Ms Bryson—Yes.

CHAIR—Is it the role of the government to subsidise a third network of national stations, so to speak, through a community station? Is not the whole idea of community radio a community coming together, being able to offer some sponsorship—up to five minutes an hour—of the sorts of things that might be important, and then broadcasting community type programs? What quality would community radio need to offer in order for it to be subsidised? Is it the policy of the Northern Territory government, for example, to subsidise community radio? When I say ‘community radio,’ let us look at this in two segments. The first segment involves crossing social boundaries. Perhaps the other segment involves ethnic or indigenous content, where there is a particular need. I am speaking broadly about this issue.

Ms Bryson—I think the issue in the Territory is one of economies of scale. My feeling is that we are just below the critical mass.

CHAIR—Running a commercial station?

Ms Bryson—Yes and also to enable community radio in the broader sense to deliver to the communities available to them.

CHAIR—Would you have a lot of sites like that in the Territory where there is not a sufficient need to maintain a commercial station, but there is a need to have a local presence?

Ms Bryson—Well that is why we support TOP FM. They make their programming available to the regional centres at times when they cannot man their centres all the time.

CHAIR—They become the core station, the artificial hub?

Ms Bryson—They become the artificial hub, and we fund the lease lines across the Territory to enable that programming to be sent to regional centres like Katherine, Tennant Creek, Jabiru, et cetera.

CHAIR—And do you insist on quality control with TOP FM? While their service may be very helpful to some areas they also have an immense amount of power if they are receiving a Northern Territory government subsidy to become the unofficial hub station.

Ms Bryson—They are asked annually to provide financial information. We are conscious, under the requirements of the Broadcasting Services Act, that the Northern Territory government cannot determine content or anything like that. But there is a reporting requirement. In fact, our department provides a cabinet submission on the issue.

CHAIR—To what extent would you subsidise their costs, in percentage terms? Round figures will do. If you do not know, could you come back to us with that information?

Ms Bryson—Yes, I can provide you with the details.

CHAIR—Is it your submission that the Commonwealth government should be subsidising that as well?

Ms Bryson—No.

CHAIR—Let us move to indigenous broadcasting. Do you have a similar hubbing or networking for that?

Ms Bryson—No.

CHAIR—Is each station self-contained?

Ms Bryson—Each station is self-contained.

CHAIR—Do you subsidise those?

Ms Bryson—No.

CHAIR—What is the general character of those stations? Are they small, low wattage transmitters from a local community centre, or are they a bit more extensive?

Ms Bryson—No. Where they exist they would be a very small wattage.

CHAIR—Broadcasting for five or 10 kilometers or something like that?

Ms Bryson—Each community, yes. It probably would not even be that.

CHAIR—The community would receive it within five to 10 kilometers?

Ms Bryson—I do not think we have many of those in the Territory at all.

CHAIR—And do they broadcast in the Aboriginal languages of that area?

Ms Bryson—Where they exist they would be. That is the whole point of having them. My knowledge of that area is not great.

CHAIR—Could you give us a bit of a follow up on that as well?

Ms Bryson—Yes, I can.

CHAIR—Finally, are any parts of the Territory still using short wave?

Ms Bryson—Not that I am aware of. But I do not know. I would have to follow up on that one as well.

CHAIR—In the past, did much of the Territory use ABC short wave?

Ms Bryson—I am sorry, I have only been in the Territory three years, so I cannot give you details.

CHAIR—I am not talking about Cox Peninsula in particular; I am just talking in general terms. I think we are getting a submission from Western Australia suggesting that there is a case for short wave programming. I just want to know whether that view is supported in the Territory. Is there a need for that? Could we have another map that shows that? What you have done here is very good, but we need a map that shows in each cluster which area has ABC Regional, which area has ABC FM or RN and which area has Triple J. We just need to be able to get a feel for these areas. We need a different style, say, for community and commercial stations. Perhaps you could show on the map which ones have standard commercial programming—AM or FM standard—and which ones have HOT FM-type programming.

Ms Bryson—My gut feeling is that there is very little of that outside Darwin.

CHAIR—This is a very good map but it does not tell us much of the character of each area.

Ms Bryson—I know, yes. My feeling is that there is very little of that outside Darwin and Alice Springs.

CHAIR—Do you get the PNN channel here, the parliamentary news broadcast?

Ms Bryson—In Darwin, yes. We probably transfer it in Alice but certainly not elsewhere.

CHAIR—Could you let us know whether AC Nielsen or one of those people have done a breakdown of Darwin or Territory stations and their listening audiences? We want to get a bit of a feeling about how the Top End might differ from the rest of Australia.

Ms Bryson—Yes.

Resolved (on motion by **Mr St Clair**):

That submission No. 160.01 from the Northern Territory government dated 12 March and any attachments that have not otherwise been received as exhibits be received as evidence in the inquiry into the adequacy of radio services in non-metropolitan Australia and as such be authorised for publication.

CHAIR—Thank you for your evidence. We would be grateful if you would come back to us on those matters that we have raised. You will receive a copy of the Hansard draft and we trust that we will be able to come back to you on other matters, if that should become necessary.

CAMERON, Mrs Janet Morrison, Managing Director, Grant Broadcasters Pty Ltd and Northern Territory Broadcasters Pty Ltd

ANDREW, Mr Michael, Group Sales Manager, Grant Broadcasters Pty Ltd and Northern Territory Broadcasters Pty Ltd

CHAIR—Welcome.

Mrs Cameron—I have prepared a statement which tells you a little about Grant Broadcasters. With me is Mike Andrew. Mike is Group Sales Manager for Northern Territory Broadcasters, who hold the two licences in Darwin for HOTFM and MIXFM.

CHAIR—Would you like to give the committee a five-minute overview of your submission? We will then ask you questions.

Mrs Cameron—Grant Broadcasters is a family-owned company. I have been involved in regional radio all my life, having been raised in Dubbo where my father owned the radio station. All my family are directors of the company and are involved in the operation of the station, having specific responsibilities for different markets. Mike Andrew has had many years of experience in both regional and metropolitan markets and was our manager in Geelong. He recently rejoined us as Group Sales Manager to foster training and development of sales, staff and sales programs in particular. He is currently Acting Manager of the two stations in Darwin.

Grant Broadcasters operate 15 radio stations in eight regional markets in New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and the Northern Territory. We operate two services in all markets except Wollongong, where we have only one FM service. We program one service to have appeal to people broadly under 35 years and the other service for people over 35 years. Despite the general description of the format being the same or similar, we do not network any of our programs from one station to another. Even the music is selected for each service in the market. We employ journalists in all markets and all local stories emanate from the market.

We take some syndicated programs and we use automation as for us it is the most effective way to utilise our staff and remain local. However, for us, the real benefit of having local staff is not so much in the provision of news and the ability to respond to emergencies; it is about having staff available to cover those events that belong to the community. For example, 2ST/Power FM are currently in the middle of the show circuit. We will do crosses or OBs from the shows at Berry, Nowra, Kangaroo Valley, Milton, Robertson and Moss Vale over approximately a 10-week period. This will necessitate weekend appearances. Last weekend the same stations were out doing crosses from various parts of the service area for Clean-Up Australia.

All stations have been involved in job drives and others have special projects such as the provision of fireworks displays in Geelong and Ballarat, breakfast on the beach in Wollongong for charity, Scone horse week and Camp Quality in Bega. We will continue to operate this way as long as we are viable. The committee has heard a lot of evidence indicating that the increase in commercial services and a variety of other services has made it extremely difficult to

maintain the same level of service. Most of the new commercial services have supplementary or s39 licences, so the existing operator was able to provide a second service in FM.

Basically, to double the number of hours of broadcast when revenue probably increased by only 10 to 15 per cent was an impossible task, unless some changes were made to the method of operation. Indeed, the ABA acknowledged this, stating that new technology, which allowed for digital storage, would make it possible. More recently, the ABA allocated third and fourth licences in some markets. There appear to have been two reasons for that. First, the ABA claimed they were implementing government policy, but perhaps more importantly they relied on one company, RG Capital, who took the opportunistic view that they could provide an extra two licences in many regional centres.

As RG Capital were and are respected broadcasters, the ABA took the view that they had the expertise to properly evaluate a market, and it consequently allocated frequencies in several markets. RG has bought a number of these licences at auction. It is interesting to see that now the ABA is planning extra licences in their markets, namely, the Gold Coast, Gosford and the Sunshine Coast. They are stating that no more licences should be granted and, furthermore, they are seeking to have the act amended to allow ownership of three licences in the market. In my view, Gold Coast, Gosford and the Sunshine Coast would all be stronger markets than Albury, Bendigo, Dubbo, Orange or Shepparton, where RG had pushed for third licences.

I realise that the committee wants to see the best outcome for regional communities. However, I urge you to think carefully about any suggested solutions posed by any individual broadcasters which may be driven by self-interest. The last time this happened it resulted in a change in the new act which allowed foreign interests to acquire radio licences. If, however, the community does value localism and wishes to see it encouraged, perhaps the answer is to find ways to encourage the continuation of as much local program content as possible. I do not believe that local content regulation is the answer. The new act was based on the removal of regulation together with the introduction of new services. It is, therefore, not reasonable to try to reintroduce regulation.

If we think of encouragement perhaps it is useful to consider the assistance that has been given to television at the time of aggregation. No such assistance was given to radio—commercial radio, that is—to introduce second services. Community broadcasters get financial assistance, yet many of them take network programs via satellite, including news and programs such as John Laws. That seems odd, given the original charter of community broadcasters. Regional television has an undertaking that funding will be provided for digital broadcasting. No doubt, community broadcasters will seek assistance also. I would also like to note that any suggestion to allow community broadcasters to increase further the time allowed for sponsorship of commercial advertisements would bring some of them closer to commercial radio and reduce our ability to maintain our resources.

I want to speak briefly about Northern Territory broadcasters because I am not too sure really whether you want me here for the views of Grant Broadcasters or to look more closely at the Northern Territory. We purchased Northern Territory Broadcasters, that is, the Darwin services HOTFM and MIXFM in August last year. Consequently, I do not yet have the same general level of understanding of the market. I can say that the stations were previously owned by a local family and I believe that they have been operated on the same philosophy as we operate

our other stations. A recent AC Nielsen survey indicated that the station rates well overall and has good results with the two different targeted demographics.

Obviously in this market it is necessary to prepare for cyclones. The station has on file a master copy of the Northern Territory counter disaster media information manual and since we purchased the station we have had close ties with emergency services. We have introduced a local news service to HOTFM. Previously local news was carried only on MIXFM. We expect to put in a second translator to carry the MIXFM service into Katherine in the middle of this year. At this time only HOTFM can be heard in Katherine. The provision of these services is not viable; however, we believe we should do it. I have only recently become aware of concerns about black spots in the Northern Territory side of our service area. The government has made funding available to television to correct black spots and FARB has recently proposed funding for radio for a similar purpose.

CHAIR—I appreciate the forthright nature of your presentation. You have not skirted the subject—you have gone straight to it—and you have not been vindictive. I thank you very much for that. You say that all your stations are self-contained and you do not hub?

Mrs Cameron—That is correct.

CHAIR—Other than for programs that you buy for special purposes. But you pre-record, do you?

Mrs Cameron—Yes, we do.

CHAIR—Let us take Darwin as an example. What part of a day is live to air and what part is pre-recorded?

Mrs Cameron—I will answer your question in two parts. At most of our stations the pre-recording is for midnight to dawn programs and, in some instances, for evening programs. Occasionally we may even pre-record a section of the afternoon program to allow the announcer—who is really on duty for the shift—to go and do something else. It may allow him to go and attend a community function, and do a cross from that function. We think that that is a better use of his time. I would probably prefer Mike to answer the question relating to the current situation. I should tell you that just as I am not fully acquainted with all the operations of the Darwin radio stations, Mike has been there only six weeks, so he is not fully informed either.

Mr Andrew—With regard to MIXFM, there is automation between midday and 3.00 on a Monday through to a Friday. The rest of the program is live. Then at nighttime, 6.00 until 6.00 the following morning, the program is automated. That automation is done locally. On HOTFM, automation occurs only from 10.00 p.m. through until 6.00 p.m. on a Monday to Friday. On the weekends both radio stations are automated from approximately 6.00 p.m. through until 6.00 a.m. the following morning.

CHAIR—And you maintain a news service?

Mr Andrew—From 6.00 a.m. through to 6.00 p.m., Monday to Friday on both stations.

CHAIR—Double shift newsroom?

Mr Andrew—Correct.

Mr GIBBONS—How many journalists do you have?

Mr Andrew—We have one local journalist.

Mr GIBBONS—But how many overall?

Mr Andrew—We actually take our local news from Sky with a supplementary local news bulletin by one journalist whom we employ on a casual basis.

Mrs Cameron—Did you mean how many journalists do we employ in the network?

Mr GIBBONS—In the network.

Mrs Cameron—I would have to stop and think, but essentially it is one at most stations. There are two in two stations, and there are three at Geelong. In addition to that, there is usually a sports reporter who may or may not be a full-time person.

Mr HARDGRAVE—How has it changed from, say, a snapshot taken 10 or 15 years ago? You have had a long-term involvement in this business. Do you have fewer journalists now than you would have had proportionately for the number of stations?

Mrs Cameron—No, we do not. We are still running about the same number of journalists as we have always had.

Mr HARDGRAVE—So from your experience in the industry and from your involvement at the FARB level, the way you operate is different from the way in which a lot of other stations operate?

Mrs Cameron—Yes. Well, I would not say entirely. I think a lot of independent broadcasters are still programming that way. But, yes. Some might call us old-fashioned.

Mr HARDGRAVE—Old-fashioned in the sense that you are doing what you were doing a decade ago, or 15 years ago? New technology is helping you?

Mrs Cameron—Yes. Even in the newsroom, there are big improvements in news. They probably were in place. Perhaps even 10 years ago they were just coming in, but there are very good digital storage systems now for news. So if you want to recast your news, instead of having to repeat or redo the whole thing, it is possible.

Mr HARDGRAVE—It is just that in your submission and in your presentation this morning you talked about the viability questions and you said that the BSA really does not deal with that. The presumption is that it is a new range of services. The services would not be there unless the commercial operators were viable, so why specify viability? But, in practice, that is not really

what is happening in the radio industry, is it? There are a lot of edges to the question of viability. People are cutting back different things to remain viable.

Mrs Cameron—Absolutely. I do not think the way we are dealing with it is necessarily the best way. It is just the way that we have chosen to do it. There are variations. But yes, certainly, there had to be adjustments. If you have a second licence you are going to now have to broadcast an extra 168 hours a week. You know that your revenue increase will be only a small increase. I think people found it difficult. Industry argued that way. I guess not surprisingly the people that we had to convince, namely, parliamentarians such as you, thought there was a lot of protection in our statements.

But we argued that the markets were not viable to do it any other way, other than for the incumbent to hold the existing licence. Second, we pointed out that there was another big advantage, that is, that you would get program diversity. In any market where there has been a second, independent station added, you will always find that they target the 18 to 39 age group. That is the most sought after target audience. So if you have two services they will sound the same because they are basically targeting the same people. If you have the one operator operating two services, they will not compete against each other. So the community benefits because they get a choice of program.

Mr HARDGRAVE—Is viability still a question? You are not on the board, so you would not know. But from the outside looking in, you would have some knowledge. Is viability still a question for organisations like RG capital, DMG and so forth—organisations that are doing a great range of relay work from a central hub? You are maintaining a journalist and some local announcers who may well pre-record their voice tracks onto some digital compression system, which a computer replays when they are fast asleep. That maintains your viability. But these stations are maintaining their viability by hubbing out of big centres. Are they making heaps more money than you for each station? Do you know?

Mrs Cameron—I cannot answer that.

Mr HARDGRAVE—But do you have an impression that they might be because they have actually taken a cut price approach to this?

Mrs Cameron—RGs just recently or some little time ago floated their company. They gave their first report to the market for their first half trading to December this year. I know that their results were substantially up on the previous year. So that would suggest to me that whatever they are doing is working financially for them.

Mr HARDGRAVE—Given again your long-term involvement in the industry, do you track where you are heading with your approach to radio? Are you on thinner margins maintaining this approach because you believe in the business, or are you saying, ‘Well, I can see where the trends are, and we will be in trouble in five years?’ I do not expect you to make a public statement about your viability, but I am trying to get an idea.

Mrs Cameron—I think that we are satisfied. We do not carry high debt. We run a fairly tight operation. I think the only thing I would fear is even more competition, more services in the market, no matter what that service is. It all takes some audience from you. With the overall size

of the markets, we cannot really afford to lose any more than the share we have now. The reason for that is that, if we do not have an adequate share, we cannot deliver a result to an advertiser. If we cannot deliver a result the rest is quite obvious.

CHAIR—That is a good point.

Mrs Cameron—That is precisely what it is about. Every new service that comes into the market is actually looking for revenue. It takes a lot longer then to explain to advertisers what it is you are doing and why you are charging what you are charging. The reason for that is that you are not selling 30 seconds of air time; you are selling an audience. You are selling people. You are selling ears, if you like. So that is an important distinction.

Mr HARDGRAVE—So if you have a market that is too segmented, with too many organisations all competing for that same set of ears, you run the risk of the advertiser saying, ‘I have to buy four stations to get the message out. I will buy one television advertisement instead.’ Is that your problem?

Mrs Cameron—That is correct. Then they do look at alternatives. It may be press, for example, one paper instead of a number of radio stations. Press, naturally, make this point.

Mr HARDGRAVE—You talked earlier about AC Nielsen surveys in this Darwin market. Can you give us a rough idea of your figures, the standing of your commercial services verses the Australian Broadcasting Corporation in Darwin?

Mrs Cameron—Yes.

CHAIR—Are you quite relaxed about revealing that information?

Mrs Cameron—Oh, yes. I should really have anticipated this question and got copies for you. But we have a very high share.

CHAIR—We can make copies of the documents you have available.

Mrs Cameron—Would you be happy if I just showed you this information? The two hard columns are MIXFM and HOTFM in breakfast. That is 10 people plus. That is the whole survey. Once you get into the rest of the day parts you see that the differentiation is even stronger. You can see that MIXFM and HOTFM are absolutely dominating this market.

Mr HARDGRAVE—So on the question of the cyclone season, dealing with commercial stations, by necessity this would be a vital ingredient in emergency service planning because of its audience coverage?

Mrs Cameron—We would believe so. Naturally, we were concerned about the comment we heard about what may have been an error of commercial radio, although I noticed our two stations were not named. I am wondering whether there may have been a mistake as to that occurrence. Mike stepped out of the room and called the station.

Mr Andrew—The current program director of the radio station was a member of staff at that time. During Cyclone Steve—I think that was the name of the cyclone that was mentioned—those radio stations were relaying live programs 24 hours a day. Announcers who were manning stations were in constant contact with the Northern Territory State Emergency Service. We complied with the terms and conditions set out in the Northern Territory counter disaster manual cyclone watch report and we actually operated for a full 24-hour period whilst that watch was in place. So at no time were we automated or did we take any program from outside Darwin.

CHAIR—Are there any other commercial stations here?

Mrs Cameron—No.

CHAIR—What was the MIXFM? Was it an AM station originally?

Mrs Cameron—Yes, 8DN.

Mr JULL—I should declare an interest. I have a stepson who is employed at HOTFM, and he is thoroughly enjoying it. I move on your statement regarding community radio. Indeed, in your submission you are fairly strong about some of the difficulties that you may be facing as a result of their development. As I mentioned earlier, is your definition of a community station basically a pseudo commercial station? Are they really developing from beyond play radio into major competitors? If so, why is that?

Mrs Cameron—I think those instances are very few. I think most community broadcasters wish to be just that. They see a niche; they see an opportunity; and they respond to that niche. I should say to you that, so far as I am aware, the community broadcasters in this market are of that ilk. But there are some others. Why do they do it? I think very often some people are employed there who just have a desire to be a commercial broadcaster, but in fact the ability to get licences is not easy and the cost involved is prohibitive for them. So they see this as an easy way to become a commercial broadcaster.

Just as a comment, and I do not know whether it is appropriate, but I also have a part interest in a metropolitan licence in Perth. I realise that this is a regional inquiry, but there is a licence there, a community broadcaster, 6NR, who just blows away our minds. This program guide went to every household in Perth. It was hand delivered to every householder in Perth. The commercial station could not afford to do that. They have car stickers. We do not have car stickers, et cetera. I am happy for you to have that material. We are a little distressed in this instance because 6IX and 6PR have both been badly handicapped by being in AM.

Everybody understands the Perth conductivity argument. The ABA is in the middle of the Perth LAP at the moment and we have sought the ability either to convert to FM or at the very least to have two translators. It is acknowledged that we cover only about 50 per cent of Perth. We have an obligation under the act which we are not meeting. The ABA, in our view, should be assisting us to get them. There are two frequencies available and they will give one to Curtin, which is also the community station, and the other to the second community station. We are just a little concerned. We do not want to be heavy-handed about this.

But somehow it seems to us that there is almost a feeling at the ABA now that the community stations have to have preference over what is required for the commercial station. That is of concern to us. So, I am sorry. That was a long-winded answer to your question. But I think it is important. We do not have any difficulties with any community broadcasters in any of the markets where we operate. We did have one broadcaster. However, despite his wishes to be a commercial broadcaster he was not able to get financial support from advertisers and after 18 months he closed.

Mr JULL—I suppose that there is a sense of frustration in some respects. With networking, the old days of regional radio training, and really being the nursery for the industry, are almost gone, with a couple of notable exceptions. Can you give me some indication of the training that you provide for young would-be broadcasters, technicians and producers? Are any of the other groups providing that service?

Mrs Cameron—I think that a lot of the training was not really formal. But working in the lesser shifts, particularly midnight to dawn in the smaller markets, it was always a case of progression. You progressed from shift to shift as your experience and ability grew and you also moved on to bigger markets. Obviously, over the years, some of those opportunities, first, in nighttime programming, have been reduced. Courses are run by FARB, and we encourage our people to attend those. In some of our markets we also employ a consultant called ESP. ESP, in fact, are employed to consult in this market. They do air checks of station personnel. They spend quite a bit of time with the program director and the station manager and it is their responsibility to air check the announcers and to try to assist them with ideas, how to plan their shifts properly, et cetera.

Mr JULL—But it is still pretty hard getting a break into the industry these days?

Mrs Cameron—Yes, it is still very hard. There are more and more courses, but the courses can only take you so far. I think the two courses that I still very much favour are courses that FARB set up some years ago. There are attachments to two universities—one is the Swinburne College of Technology in Melbourne and the other is Macquarie University, the Australian Film, Television and Radio School. That is a 26-week course. During the 26 weeks the people who are being trained there also have attachments at radio stations, generally of a two-week duration. All those people are successful in getting jobs in the industry when they are finished. As I said earlier, the course is very specific to radio broadcasting.

Mr JULL—Obviously emanating from 2DU days it would seem that the company philosophy now is very much local involvement in the community. I noticed that a great number of tributes were paid to you by various community organisations throughout the network. That being so, and taking into account your commitment to local communities, do you have any concern about foreign ownership of Australian radio?

Mrs Cameron—Yes, I do. I have to be honest and say that I cannot give you examples of what should not happen. Perhaps I can give you one example and it is probably not what you are expecting. I believe now that some new metropolitan licences are being auctioned. Both British and American broadcasters have a much better opportunity to buy those licences simply because of the state of our dollar. If you consider the price that was paid in Sydney and in Melbourne, it was a lot less for the company that bought it than it would have been for an

equivalent Australian company. So, yes, that saddens me. I think also it probably makes it more possible for continued buying. It does put other countries in at in an advantageous position, at the moment anyway. Hopefully that will not last long.

Mr JULL—But you are still not asking to go back to regulation?

Mrs Cameron—No, I am not because I think there are always ways and means of trying to twist around regulations. I think it is more important that people acknowledge. I think it is wonderful that what is coming from this inquiry is a realisation that radio is important. I do not think until you had this inquiry that people quite realised just how much they relied on radio; not just on air. I keep on stressing how important are the off-air activities. That is why you need the people. That is why there have to be people in place to respond when local community leaders come to the station either wanting assistance, suggestions or whatever for their various organisations. But I think, as I said, I want to continue doing this. I have no intention of changing. But, by the same token, I fear regulation because I think sometimes it has unintended consequences. I also believe that we need to be able to do whatever we need to do.

Mr JULL—I ask what is not intended to be a rude question. You are the single operator in a number of licensed areas?

Mrs Cameron—Yes.

Mr JULL—Is there much of a difference in the nature of your operation or the nature of your programming in those single licence markets compared to those where you are in competition with some of the big fellows?

Mrs Cameron—Well, even though we are a single operator in Geelong we still have to be very mindful of Melbourne because all the Melbourne stations put a very good signal into Geelong. So, yes, our emphasis on localism is not only because it is what we believe is the right thing to do; it is a necessity in that market. That would be the same answer for Wollongong.

Mr JULL—What about a place like Mount Gambier? That is one of yours is it not?

Mrs Cameron—No, it is not. That is a DMG market. But we do have a station at Murray Bridge, which is just outside Adelaide. Again, all the Adelaide stations put an extremely good signal into the area. Actually, that is another area where we are disappointed in a lack of response from the ABA. We owned that station for about 18 months. It did not have an s39, a second licence. It had the availability to do it, but it had not been executed. We felt it was important to put in that service. We were concerned about the technical guidelines. The ABA at the time said to us, ‘You put that service in. If it is inappropriate and the main transmitter will not do the job, then you will have to have translators.’

As soon as the service went in, it was obvious that it would not cover the area. We are sitting here talking about black spots in the Northern Territory. I am telling you about two black spots in our coverage in South Australia and we are having trouble getting the ABA to let us put in these two translators. The dialogue has been going on now for several months, including us doing the technical work. As recently as only last week we were told that, despite our consultant

being briefed by the ABA, it was insufficient and we would have to wait yet again until the LAP in Adelaide was completed.

CHAIR—When is that due?

Mrs Cameron—I am sorry, unfortunately that is the difficulty. I know they have always had a pro problem with resources. I have to give some credibility to that. Nonetheless, no timetable has been met in the five-year history of the thing. All we know is that we have two pockets in our service area that are not receiving the second service. In October they told us that we would be allowed to do test transmissions. We have actually bought the transmitters and we have negotiated the sites. We have done all that, but we cannot put it to air. I am very disappointed.

CHAIR—Despite the fact that you have given them your technical consultant's advice?

Mrs Cameron—Yes. The consultant is an independent person. He does not work for us. He is acknowledged by the ABA as somebody who can provide. In fact we checked with them first before we secured his services.

CHAIR—Well, why not let you on air until they sort it all out? Ms Cameron That is our question exactly.

Mr GIBBONS—You are obviously very critical of the ABA?

Mrs Cameron—Sorry, you have caught me in a bad week.

Mr GIBBONS—If it was within your power, how would you restructure the ABA to make it more responsive to the needs of industry? What do you think is the major problem?

Mrs Cameron—I think the major problem seems to be the lack of resources. That is what we are always led to understand. Then, of course, the longer you take to deal with any issue, the more staff changes you have and you have to go back to explaining it to the new people all over again. There must be some way of prioritising them so that they deal with issues that are relatively simple rather than having a lot of things to back them up. It will take some time to deal with. But I am sorry; I do not have a simple solution. I do believe that they are trying.

Mr GIBBONS—You said earlier that you were expanding into the Katherine market later this year. You also said that it is not viable. When do you expect it to be viable? Obviously it is a major cost burden on you to be able to do that. You would not just be doing it for the community interest sector? You obviously think that, at some stage in the future, it would become viable. Is that the case?

Mrs Cameron—I would like to think that we might be a little more proactive in Katherine. We may be able to generate a little more from that market. But, generally speaking, I just see it as part of the totality of the service. As long as the MIXFM and HOTFM service is viable, I am content with that.

Mr GIBBONS—Your programs from midnight to dawn are automated. If an emergency are you actually able to send someone in to coordinate the broadcast. How does that work? How many people are on standby, if you like?

Mrs Cameron—Mike might like to add to that but, in a general sense, any emergency authority should be regularly updated about who the contact people are. Generally at most stations three people will be nominated. The emergency authority, that is, the police, or the SES, will have a telephone number—probably a home and a mobile number—for the manager, the program director and the station engineer or technician. I believe that that is the situation at Darwin.

Mr Andrew—Yes, that is correct.

Mrs Cameron—So that emergency services would dial any one of those three people on any one of those six numbers. They then would immediately go to the station and do whatever was required, either break into transmission or get in the people who could do it. But in an emergency all of the people could do that actually. They might not have the best voices in the world but they would be capable of breaking into the automation and voicing in a message.

Mr MOSSFIELD—I want to explore the question of DMG's ownership, a matter which I know has already been raised. What impact does the DMG's ownership of the radio industry have on a family-owned operator, particularly taking into account the fact that the DMG's organisations are seeking a greater level of return for their money? Do you have any experience of organisations such as yours being forced out of the industry because of competition from overseas-owned radio stations or networks?

Mrs Cameron—I can speak only in general terms. I have heard that limits are set by overseas investors on what they expect by way of a return in the dollar. I have heard the figure of 40c in the dollar. I stress, however, that that is what I have heard; it is not what I know. Insofar as whether I have any concerns about being forced out by overseas competitors, we do not have any intention of selling. The fact that my family are now involved, I think, makes us a third generation company. I think that would indicate that our intention is to be there for the long haul.

It may make it more difficult for us to grow any further because they may be in a better position to offer a higher price than we would be able to offer. One person actually said to me some time ago, 'Why would you argue against cross media ownership, against foreign ownership, when it is your best exit strategy if you want the very best price?' I acknowledged that but, as I said earlier, that is something for my family, my children, to worry about, not me. We do not have an exit strategy.

Mr MOSSFIELD—I refer to the point you made earlier that you were opposed to regulations. If unrestricted overseas ownership of the Australian radio industry is creating difficulties for the Australian-owned industry would it not be appropriate for some sort of regulations, similar to the regulations that apply to other media?

Mrs Cameron—Yes. I can understand what you are suggesting. Perhaps it would be so. I would need to give that a lot of thought. I suppose, *prima facie*, I have a difficulty with

changing the rules. If you amend an act to achieve certain criteria such as reducing or eliminating regulation, that regulation is not eliminated, but it eliminates a lot of the regulatory environment. Then there is a cost to pay for that. I have a problem then with trying to reverse it. But it may be that there could be some benefit in the future. Presumably it would be grandfathered. I do not think it would be fair to disadvantage anyone who had already made acquisitions on the basis of the act, on the law as it currently stands.

Mr MOSSFIELD—I notice in your recommendations you state that you recognise that commercial viability needs to be restored to the act to protect the loss of localism in the future. Do you do support the regulations coming into the act?

Mrs Cameron—Yes. I would like to see economic viability back into the act. I know that one of the suggestions that has been put to you for consideration is the reintroduction at the same time of an adequate and comprehensive test.

CHAIR—Could you enlarge on that? Mr Mossfield has probably again raised the seminal question, that is, that you do not want reregulation. But at the time of the issuing or renewal of licences is there not an opportunity for people to profile their stations and to state what contribution they believe they will make to the community and so on?

Mrs Cameron—Yes.

CHAIR—I would just like you to enlarge on that.

Mrs Cameron—Obviously, as Mr Hardgrave mentioned, I have been around for a long time. I was in this environment when we had public inquiries for the renewal of licences. Preparing for those was quite a big exercise. Indeed, the material that we had to submit was quite a big exercise. Because that has been taken away, if you like, that was an exercise for the management of the station to do. That means now that, as the manager is not doing that, he can be doing some of these other things, like making sure we get an extra 168 hours of program to air a week. I understand why you would want to see us trying to go back to that.

Perhaps that is why I am worried about the idea of adequate and comprehensive—not because I do not think that that is what we should be doing, but simply because we will have to account for it. In any event I should tell you that the ABA or the ABT at the time had to make a subjective judgment as to what was adequate and comprehensive. For example, what is adequate and comprehensive in a market like Longreach may not be the adequate and comprehensive in a market like Wollongong and vice versa because of so many factors—the size of the market, revenue for the market and other services that are coming into the market.

Years ago when we owned Dubbo, Parkes and Mudgee, I remember having licence renewals. I explained to the ABA at the time that what we did with local sport very much varied from market to market. The ultimate service was the service that 2DU Dubbo provided. But that was because it was the biggest revenue market. We had more resources and we put them back into the best programming we could do. In Mudgee we had to content ourselves with getting crosses from the game instead of doing a comprehensive coverage.

CHAIR—We are beset as a committee with the fact that we cannot recommend to government that what has been happening in the past is adequate. You are one of the respected broadcasters. We would like to know what you would consider a fair amount of reregulation. Perhaps that is not an appropriate expression. What would you consider is a greater degree of accountability? I think a number of radio stations that are now networking some stations 24 hours a day—hubbing them 24 hours a day—are having to face an inquiry at which someone is given an opportunity to say that they would do X, Y and Z, They might only hub them 12 hours a day, but they would soon get back on their toes in respect of local news bulletins, local community announcements and the like. Just give us a bit of a feel for what you consider is a greater degree of accountability. You do not want to go back to 1990-92, but where is the compromise between the laissez-faire attitude of today and 1990-92?

Mrs Cameron—First, I have to say that I understand your concerns but I do not know enough about the programming and the decisions leading to those people choosing to hub. They may well feel that they are providing a better form of program than they were when they were live. That may well be. I am not arguing with that. When we first started having annual licence renewals we were having public inquiries every year. I think the ABT actually believed that the public would come to the inquiry, but they did not. Then I think they realised that they were too putting a lot of resources into holding those inquiries.

CHAIR—What about on a triennium basis, for example?

Mrs Cameron—I think something like that is probably a possibility.

CHAIR—Would that be unduly onerous on your network?

Mrs Cameron—No. I think we could handle something of that nature, perhaps even as the need arises. That is what I was about to say. Not all markets finished up with annual licence renewals of a public hearing type. The last few years we did not have any public inquiries. With our licence a fairly big form still to be filled out, but that was it. We did not have the pleasure of the ABT coming to town.

Mr HARDGRAVE—The committee thanks you for putting some recommendations in your submission. Basically, you are suggesting that we look at changes to the act to cover the treatment of new licensees to come?

Mrs Cameron—Yes.

Mr HARDGRAVE—Perhaps you believe, as you rightly said, that grandfathering in current circumstances is a natural justice approach. But we should look at the question of commercial viability so far as new licences are concerned.

Mrs Cameron—Yes, I do believe so.

Mr HARDGRAVE—Do you think that the ABA actually understands the impact of new licences going into the market?

Mrs Cameron—I think in the first round they really did not look at it thoroughly. It appeared to be all right as long as there was an expression of interest from a commercial broadcaster. That is all it was. If you look at what that broadcaster was expected to provide you will see that it was absolutely nothing. They did not do any research at all. In the case of Ballarat, which was a market where there was an expression of interest, we mounted what we thought were terrific arguments. They, on the other hand, did not have to put any arguments as to why. I think that was wrong. When I said so to the current chairman of the ABA and to officers of the department they kept on saying do to me, 'Naturally, you are defensive. Naturally, you will be protecting your market. These people, on the other hand, are respected broadcasters. We assume they have evaluated the market properly.' But they did not ask for that evaluation. They asked for nothing.

Mr HARDGRAVE—To be totally fair though, the ABA are under no requirement under the BSA to consider viability and to naturally make a presumption like that.

Mrs Cameron—That is correct. However, there are various clauses in the act, particularly section 23, which could be interpreted to require them to go somewhat further than they did, in my view. But one of the dramatic changes, of course, was that industry lost its appeals right in a case in Western Australia. Up until that time, anyone could appeal a decision of the ABA. All that happened was that the decision went back to the ABA and if they had made errors of judgment they had to rewrite their decision. That appeal right was lost some time ago. So the appeal mechanism now left to a broadcaster, if they are not happy with the decision, is to go to the Federal Court, which is a much more expensive operation.

CHAIR—So you are saying that there should be some intermediate form of objection?

Mrs Cameron—Yes, I do. I believe so.

Mr HARDGRAVE—Where in the BSA is the direction to the ABA to make a judgment about the competency of an aspirant station and, therefore, simply to believe what they have got to say when they are getting a licence?

Mrs Cameron—It probably is still not particularly specific in that area. I think it depends on how you read the various things that are there for consideration.

Mr HARDGRAVE—So the ABA are not following the letter of the act as much as they are making a presumption. Have they developed a practice of stating—and do not take offence at the example I use—'RG Capital look like an impressive bunch and they are professional radio broadcasters so we will just presume that they have done everything right and we will let them have the licence.'

Mrs Cameron—That was certainly my experience. Well, not that they will let them have the licence, because that process then became an auction. All that RGs could do was suggest to the ABA that there was room in the market. Actually, in all markets I think they asked for two extra licences.

Mr HARDGRAVE—But it is all over the place, is it not? You have four stations in Cairns, two in Darwin and two in Brisbane?

Mrs Cameron—Yes.

Mr HARDGRAVE—You could not find three more diverse sorts of marketplaces with completely different treatments. The ABA logic is what I think the committee really wants to try to get to, so far as this question of any concern about viability is concerned. Viability has not been mentioned in the Broadcasting Services Act. In fact, it is doing quite the opposite. It is creating an environment of, ‘Let the buyer beware of the market forces. So what if we drop a radio station or two? We will just keep on squeezing in licences.’

Mrs Cameron—When I informally spoke to some of the members of the ABA and the officers and suggested that that would be the result there was a shrug of the shoulders and they said, ‘Well, that might happen. We hope it will not. But if that is what happens, so be it.’

Mr HARDGRAVE—You mentioned 6IX in Western Australia?

Mrs Cameron—Yes.

Mr HARDGRAVE—How long has that been going on?

Mrs Cameron—6IX and 6PR are the two AM commercial stations in Perth. It has been known that they have not had a satisfactory signal for a long time.

Mr HARDGRAVE—For something like a decade?

Mrs Cameron—Yes, all of that. However, from the moment that they determined that the way to go was a logical progression of looking at each market rather than reacting to problems in particular markets, it meant that this matter would not be addressed until they looked at the total picture in Perth. I do not actually have a problem with that. I have a problem with the fact that it has taken so long. I think the concept was fine. I think the concept of looking at Perth in totality is fine. As I said earlier, I am just disappointed at the moment. Only a draft LAP is out and we are providing them with as much information as we can in order to try to get a better outcome.

Mr HARDGRAVE—But they will do draft LAPs and allocate licences like they have in Sydney, for instance?

Mrs Cameron—Correct.

Mr HARDGRAVE—But not fix up problems that have existed for a decade or more?

Mrs Cameron—Well, they have made one suggestion to us as to how they might fix 6IX’s and 6PR’s problem, but it is totally unacceptable to us.

Mr HARDGRAVE—To change the frequency?

Mrs Cameron—Yes actually, and the site. So the cost to us to do that and to go from one poor AM site to another poor AM site is just—

Mr JULL—It is mind boggling.

Mrs Cameron—Yes, it is; it really is.

Mr HARDGRAVE—Given all that we have just been discussing, do you actually see a need for the BSA to be changed to give firm direction to the ABA about the sorts of processes that they are adopting, which are not getting the results that industry would expect, or do we simply allow industry to heal its own wounds and report what they have done and what frequencies they have used and then basically say, ‘Why do we really need an ABA?’

Mrs Cameron—Yes. I think the act could do with some amendment. I think it does need strengthening. If the findings of this committee are that viability is essential to a good outcome, I think that needs to be made much clearer. Obviously, in the way it has been done in the moment, that has not been given enough consideration. I think there has been a bit more movement in more recent decisions.

Mr HARDGRAVE—Since this inquiry started, do you think?

Mrs Cameron—No. I believe that in Geelong we were listened to, but we did much more than just put in a submission. We believed initially that that was the appropriate way to do it; that it was improper to speak to members; that it was improper to speak to our local member. But by the time we got to Geelong we realised that that was not what other people were doing. So we then spoke to, and had a lot of information from, people in Geelong indicating that they did not want a third licence there. We spoke to the local member and so on. So with the assistance of those people I think the ABA did listen to us.

CHAIR—Why would the ABA want to press on with this third and fourth licence scenario when they cannot get your translators right in Murray Bridge?

Mrs Cameron—That is the second very good question you have asked me.

CHAIR—The thing that disturbs me is that it is your belief that these third licence aspirants have virtually set their own agenda. Is that the nature or the thrust of your submission?

Mrs Cameron—I think anyone is entitled to grow, as were RGs. I do not think RGs were at fault in wanting to grow their network or group of stations. I think they were perfectly entitled to do what they did. Perhaps there should have been more consideration given to the requirements of a would-be aspirant than was given before that decision was made. As I indicated before, I am concerned now that as that was the major reason for three or four licences going into markets they are now faced with the possibility of three or four licences in their own market which they are suggesting is not viable. Yet it is my belief that those same three markets are the most viable markets in regional Australia. Are they able to handle three or four? I do not know. When you look at a judgment that put only one additional licence into Sydney, it is difficult to understand.

CHAIR—Take a typical medium- to large-size provincial city like Mackay. Do you believe there is the capacity there, with 80,000 to 100,000 people, to take four stations?

Mrs Cameron—No, I do not. I did not apply. We could have attempted to do what RG did. We did not apply; we did not express an interest in any market at all. Yet back in 1988, I think it was, when the ABA put four markets up for a second independent licence—Geelong, Shepparton, the Gold Coast and Gosford—our assessment of those four markets was that two of them could maintain an independent service. We were applicants in the Gold Coast and in Gosford. We were successful in the Gold Coast, but not in Gosford. There were 14 applicants in the Gold Coast.

That was our reading of what an excellent market that was. The fact that 14 people wanted to put a licence in there is some indication of how a lot of people were reading that market. I think RGs have actually gone to the Federal Court to try to prevent this. I think it is wrong that they have to go to the Federal Court. I have already said that. But we will have to wait and see whether or not they are successful. If that licence was auctioned my prediction is that it would fetch the highest price of any regional market in Australia. I will be out of the bidding, unfortunately.

Mr MOSSFIELD—We have been asking independent operators in regional areas about the impact that digital broadcasting will have. You made a suggestion that the government should make a contribution to capital costs. Could you expand on that? If that is the case, would that apply also to the large multinational companies that are operating in industry? Would they get the same assistance as independent people?

Mrs Cameron—I do not think I have even thought about a differentiation because, after all, it is about bringing service to the community. I think that is what has to come first. Indeed, we do not yet know a lot about what these costs will be. FARB has done some work but, because every region is so different in the area that it will have to cover, we know that the costs will be substantial. But we really still do not have any proper idea of quantum. The mode that finishes up being chosen will make a difference too. Regional radio actually believes that, if VHF is used, that will save us some considerable cost.

CHAIR—Do you have any worries about digital. With the technology that we have throughout Australia in AM and, to a lesser extent, FM stations, the fortuitous coverage is a huge feature of regional radio.

Mrs Cameron—Yes.

CHAIR—Do you think that reasonable equivalents will be able to be achieved with digital radio?

Mrs Cameron—I have my doubts because I know that even digital mobile coverage is not nearly as good. I held on to my old huge mobile phone for ages.

CHAIR—Because of the fortuitous coverage aspect?

Mrs Cameron—Yes. To answer your question, yes, I believe so. We have one service in FM in particular. It is a Nowra-based service, but it has a wonderful site and that signal just goes everywhere. It can be heard in Sydney; it can be heard as far out as Lithgow. That is of no benefit to us; nonetheless it is a fact of life.

CHAIR—Thank you, Ms Cameron and Mr Andrew for coming this morning. We value your evidence. You are fairly unique in that you have one of the largest, if not the largest, private networks. The fact that you have retained so much localism, newsrooms and the like I suppose will be educative to some of your colleagues in industry. We will be sending out a draft of today's proceedings. We trust that we can come back to you. I just have a sneaking feeling that we might call you to Canberra before we finish. That will be in the next couple of months. Would you be prepared to do that if we needed you?

Mrs Cameron—Yes, Mr Chairman. I thank you very much for having me. I hope that I have not sounded too negative about things. Actually, all my life I have been supportive of the entire radio industry. I wanted to work for the betterment of all. I guess that I have never been critical of segments. I feel tonight that I will not sleep because there has been either real or implied criticism, and that bothers me.

CHAIR—Let me put your mind at rest. If we do not flush these things out onto the table at inquiries like this, they will never come out. That is the whole idea of these inquiries. That is the whole idea of parliamentary privilege attaching to them. There are four Labor, four Liberal and two national members on this committee. We are particularly bipartisan. We are spread across three states. We will report to the Parliament in a bipartisan way. So I would not have any sleepless nights about it.

Mrs Cameron—Thank you.

Resolved (on motion by **Mr Mossfield**) .

That information provided by grant broadcasters dated 12 march 2001 in respect of charts be received in evidence to the inquiry.

ARCHER, Mr Graham John, Manager, 104.1 TOP FM, Darwin

ANDREW, Mr Michael, Group Sales Manager, Grant Broadcasters Pty Ltd and Northern Territory Broadcasters Pty Ltd

CHAIR—Would you like to make an opening statement?

Mr Archer—I would, just a brief overview. As I mentioned earlier, I am the Manager of TOP FM, which represents the Territory Network. I am also the President of the Northern Territory Community Radio Association, which covers and represents Katherine FM, GoveFM, 8CCC Alice Springs and 8CCC in Tennant Creek. I am also the Chair of NT Create, which is the ITAB for training in the Northern Territory. I would like briefly to give you my credentials. I first commenced in broadcasting back in 1971 at a regional radio station in northern New South Wales. Since that time I have gained extensive experience not only in regional broadcasting but also in metropolitan and remote radio stations across Australia.

I worked in all areas of broadcasting such as commercial, indigenous and community, holding positions such as journalist, announcer and sales. For the last 20 years I have held senior management positions. I have been responsible for projects such as BRACS and community radio in Darwin which, I believe, is why I have been invited to speak here today. In this written submission I outline the uniqueness of community radio stations like TOP FM and the vast footprint that it covers. TOP FM commenced operation in 1981 and now, 20 years later, it provides daily program services to affiliated radio stations within the Territory Network, including breakfast and current affairs programming.

TOP FM operates from the Northern Territory University campus at Casuarina, and is accessible to students, community groups, local business and academia. TOP FM has a strong commitment to over 22 multilingual groups who broadcast in their homeland language to provide news, music and information to the non-English speaking community across the Territory Network. The gay and lesbian community also utilises TOP FM with a weekly program. TOPFM played a major role in assisting the traditional owners at Darwin, the Larrakia Nation, to obtain their own community broadcasting licence. Prior to that time the voice of the Larrakia was heard on TOP FM.

Today I would like briefly to explain the importance of training within the community and the broadcasting industry. For me, entry into commercial radio was possible in the early 1970s because of my tenacity and my willingness to work from midnight to dawn - what was known then as the graveyard shift. Being so isolated, it was the worst shift to get, but it provided the opportunity for a beginner to learn. Unfortunately, around the late 1980s, even these rare and limited opportunities began to disappear and stations started networking syndicated programs. This resulted in very few broadcasting staff being able to get their staff from either commercial or the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. Of course, the logical option was community radio.

In Darwin TOP FM has trained quite a few of the on-air presenters at the ABC. TOP FM, like many other community stations, inherited the role of a broadcast trainer by default and tackled the challenge head on while commercial and other more funded broadcasts do not want, are not

willing or are not able to accept the role of a training body within the communities that they are licensed to serve. Community stations like TOP FM are answering the call and best serving their community. TOP FM has been proactive in training since 1996. Training is provided for our ethnic presenters through the Australian ethnic radio training project and in-house training for all volunteer presenters. Both training programs have been extremely successful.

TOP FM is about to launch a 500-hour certificate course in broadcasting, the first at this level in Darwin. Prior to even finalising the curriculum a huge number of expressions of interest were flowing in. This interest I believe demonstrates the awareness and presence of TOP FM in the community and the future that the station now has as a training resource. I request that the communications committee analyse the Commonwealth's current and future role of funding and the level of fiscal and resource support provided for training by community radio stations such as TOP FM. The question of quantity and quality in radio stations is a complex one.

In Alice Springs urban the quantity is plentiful, with 11 radio stations for a population of 25,000. But travel just 40 kilometres out of town and you are unable to hear any station until you reach a low powered BRAC station. In Darwin we have a larger demographic area and less radio choice. At TOP FM we have replaced our transmitter but we are still experiencing a black spot within our signal area, in Palmerston, which is less than 20 kilometres down the road. Despite this, TOP FM still continues to have a solid audience in the Palmerston area. In fact, the listener support in and out of Darwin for community stations like TOP FM is strong. Why? Because we are part of our community. We are programming presenters, and our involvement reflects the same.

The Northern Territory is a unique situation having vast distances across the most isolated and remote areas. It reaches only small population pockets. This hinders a return on investment but committees and organisations must examine the big picture. Community stations like TOP FM have strengthened their position with affiliations like the Territory Network providing community services to groups and individuals throughout the Northern Territory. Being a community stations means that you recognise the need for change at the grass roots level. You are not afraid to amend or adapt your radio station and embrace new technology to meet the needs of your listeners.

Community radio has played an exciting role which will increase, but only if there is long-term structured support. Otherwise, the future will pass us and our community by. The House of Representatives communications committee inquiry has been given the vitally important task of investigating the adequacy of radio service in non-metropolitan radio. I wish the committee ample and sufficient luck in finding true and appropriate answers.

CHAIR—Thank you Mr Archer. We heard earlier evidence that TOP FM is the unofficial hub for other community stations. Do they contribute to your costs?

Mr Archer—No, they do not.

CHAIR—Would you mind telling us your annual budget?

Mr Archer—Our budget is \$300,000.

CHAIR—How do you raise that?

Mr Archer—We raise that through sponsorship and we get funding off the Northern Territory government through OCSAT.

CHAIR—Do you use your full five minutes per hour?

Mr Archer—No, not really. We have not reached that yet. We are aiming to do that in some areas. But how we do support the network through the Northern Territory government? It is also through the stations that we broadcast as a network. We share sponsorship dollars with them.

CHAIR—Some of the sponsorship you get you pay to other stations?

Mr Archer—We do, yes. They share in any revenue we raise. We actually share that with them.

CHAIR—Do you have a structured program format in the sense that during certain hours of the day you provide core programming and at other times they go on to localism, or is it a more informal thing on a station-by-station basis?

Mr Archer—It is fairly well structured. Monday to Friday we broadcast from 5.30 a.m. to 9.00 a.m., which is regarded as the Territory Network, which broadcasts into Alice Springs, Tennant Creek Katherine, Gove and to other areas.

CHAIR—So the hub provides that five minutes?

Mr Archer—We do provide that. They have their own local content. We have a relay system which enables them to play their own sponsorship messages, IDs and other things such as that.

CHAIR—But when do they go on to localism? Is that from 9 o'clock?

Mr Archer—After 12 noon they go local, that is, provided they have the volunteers to do that. Most of those stations are running only on volunteers.

CHAIR—I am not trying to be difficult, but is that not a bit anachronistic? You are community radio stations yet the hub is doing most of the work at the prime broadcast times?

Mr Archer—Well, it is, but then again we believe that what we are providing is the only local territory-based information service. We provide music and news. We support a lot of independent Northern Territory artists as well, which other stations do not do.

CHAIR—Do you have your own journalists?

Mr Archer—At the moment, no, we do not.

CHAIR—From whom do you take your news?

Mr Archer—We take it from National Radio News through the CBAA.

CHAIR—You do not do any local news as such?

Mr Archer—We were doing that up until December, but funds became so short that we were unable to continue that service.

CHAIR—Do you get any form of subsidy from anyone?

Mr Archer—We get some funding through the ethnic AERTP. The other funding is through OCSAT.

CHAIR—Well how much of that \$300,000?

Mr Archer—We receive \$130,000 through OCSAT depending on the number of hours that we do training and broadcasting in language. We cover 22 languages, which covers our nighttime broadcasting.

CHAIR—You do an East Timor program and that sort of thing?

Mr Archer—We do East Timor; we do Japanese; we do Timorese; we do Indonesian. So really, if the demand is there, we cover that. Our audience really dictates what it wants.

CHAIR—Is there an SBS radio station here?

Mr Archer—No.

CHAIR—So you do all that style of work?

Mr Archer—We do.

Mr JULL—One of the propositions that has been put to us is that we should establish a national indigenous network, preferably carried by the ABC and backed by the ABC. I would like your comments on that. It seems to me to be a pretty far-fetched thing if you are to really make a contribution to these local communities by doing it that way.

Mr Archer—I can only say that I think that the National Indigenous Radio Service, which is already set up through Brisbane, would cover the national radio service for indigenous people, which is also accessible here via satellite. That happens through CAAMA. My involvement there was instrumental in setting that up. That is also relayable through into what we call BRACS communities, which may be only 100 people in the community, but they can then transmit within their own local area. But they are then able to broadcast back to CAAMA or, in this case it would be Larrakia.

Mr HARDGRAVE—Do you have any idea of how many Territorians do not have access to radio services or to crystal clear FM services? Maybe that is the way to look at it.

Mr Archer—It would be pretty hard to judge that. I know that you have asked questions before about audience surveys. It is pretty hard to judge. We did an independent survey on behalf of TOP FM. We put our own questionnaire together and delivered that via volunteers into homes. We went into 7,000 homes in Darwin and Palmerston. The response from that was that we had a high percentage of people listening to us.

Mr HARDGRAVE—I am not looking to find out who is number one. I am just trying to find out who does not have access to radio. I suspect everybody can pick up radio—as Mr Jull suggested—with a crystal set. If you plug that onto the cold water tap you can pick up almost anything. I am asking about radio services that are designed to cover the areas in which they live. Do we know how many Territorians do not have one of those?

Mr Archer—Out of the population it is believed that about 10 to 15 per cent cannot pick up radio.

CHAIR—Is there still a short wave service?

Mr Archer—There is. The last report in which I was involved was just on four years ago.

CHAIR—Is that a special service?

Mr Archer—It is a special service.

CHAIR—That comes out of where?

Mr Archer—ABC broadcasts through that and CAAMA down in Alice Springs broadcasts through that as well. I am not aware of any others who use it. But the usage was down to less than 100 people three years ago.

Mr HARDGRAVE—If you are sponsored pretty heavily by the Northern Territory government to make up your \$300,000 budget, do they have any plans to ensure that your station is heard by every Territorian?

Mr Archer—They do. That is really what the Territory Network is about. That was the structure of that. It was enforced before I arrived at TOP FM. It is a well-listened to program because we cover local issues. We do not take any syndication. We have a local presenter who talks about local issues in Alice Springs and in Gove. We also look at other areas of concern, not only political life but the work life of people who live in remote areas.

Mr HARDGRAVE—Do you think this border-to-border concept is achievable by or obtainable for the Territory?

Mr Archer—It is. But it depends on the cost and I am not referring here to financial terms. It is very much an overseas trend. You can hop in a car and drive right across America and pick up the same station right across America. Some people would like that. I do not know whether that is a totally good idea, but I believe it is a good idea. I can only speak on behalf of our network. TOP FM is not trying to split atoms. We are trying to reach the community. We are trying to

give them a voice. I think the essential part of that is that wars are fought over having a chance to have your voice heard. I think it is important that we look at that.

Mr HARDGRAVE—So from Three Ways to Katherine, down through to the Western Australia border, the sorts of black spots that exist are attainable from your community station's point of view, given that the Territory government so heavily backs your organisation?

Mr Archer—I do not know the full cost of trying to do that sort of coverage, but certainly changes in technology occur. I know that you touched on areas like digital broadcasting and those areas. Certainly satellite is one way of doing it. But at the moment we transmit on landline, which is fairly costly. We have also been advised by Telstra that they will go as soon as they are pulled out or they become inoperable. They will not continue. So that means that that service will not be able to be provided unless it is on a satellite service, or through some other way.

Mr HARDGRAVE—Is Telstra saying that the maintenance of the line is just too much for them to guarantee?

Mr Archer—There is no money in it. This is part of getting any broadcasting out into remote areas, whether it be in the Territory, in Queensland or in Western Australia. You have a small population and a huge area to cover. There are no real dollars in it for the companies concerned.

Mr HARDGRAVE—Bouncing it off the birds is probably the answer then?

Mr Archer—It certainly is.

CHAIR—Earlier you used the analogy of short wave. Presumably people who are using short wave can get nothing else. If there are only 100 odd of them, is the border-to-border thing that important? Should you be looking at other technologies, such as satellite?

Mr Archer—I think, like a lot of technology, it probably became unpopular, but it is still used by some people in remote areas when that is the only form of communication that they can use to make contact with people or to hear from hear people. It is certainly a minority.

CHAIR—People want crystal-clear FM sound?

Mr Archer—Actually, they are told that that is what they want. I think that goes on all the time. It is not necessary. The question is: is that important? Yes, it is. If you live in a small country town that has 20 people in it why should you not get the same reception, whether it be television or radio, as do other people? I grew up in a small country town, and we listened to radio on a squeaky sort of thing at that stage. But with today's technology we can bounce signals off the moon, so surely we can get a signal across the Territory.

Mr ST CLAIR—We have been talking about the vastness of the Territory and Western Australia for that matter. We have been talking also about tourism and weather reports, et cetera and the importance of those reports. Do people still use UHF radios in the Territory? I presume that that is the way in which they speak to each other? Do properties or isolated people have radio networks?

Mr Archer—They still do that.

Mr ST CLAIR—Is it HF, or is it just UHF? What is the major one that they use? Do you know?

Mr Archer—I do not know whether I can answer that question correctly. But certainly those systems are still in use in remote areas. I think some of these big pastoral companies would certainly use some sort of communication like that.

Mr ST CLAIR—As do the transport companies when they are sending in stock floats or whatever. They would know what the weather conditions were like a thousand kilometres away?

Mr Archer—Yes. That is certainly used. The emergency services would have some set up, I am sure, like that, which would keep them in contact.

Mr ST CLAIR—Do you believe that, from your experience—and you may not know the answer—most people in remote areas of both the Territory and Western Australia would have those sorts of facilities all the time anyway?

Mr Archer—I do not know whether all would have that. Some would have it certainly, but there are certainly a number of smaller community areas that would not have any of that access to that technology.

Mr MOSSFIELD—You are a fairly unique community radio organisation as distinct from, say, other parts of Australia where radio would be confined to a particular group, interest or culture? The demand is a lot greater than it would be in other areas. Do you actually broadcast into any areas in the Northern Territory that are not covered by other radio networks?

Mr Archer—We probably do not broadcast. We do broadcast into areas that are not covered by other commercial stations, for example, GoveFM, which we transmit to, and they transmit themselves in their local area. That is covered by the ABC, but no commercial concern. It is a very small population.

Mr MOSSFIELD—So how many people do you have employed in your organisation?

Mr Archer—We have a staff of three.

Mr MOSSFIELD—Full-time?

Mr Archer—Full-time. We have over 100 volunteers. We run the station 24-hours a day, seven days a week.

Mr MOSSFIELD—Is it automated?

Mr Archer—There is no automation.

CHAIR—They are all live announcers?

Mr Archer—They are all live, except we take the BBC at night.

CHAIR—From when?

Mr Archer—Usually from midnight or later on, depending on volunteer turn up.

Mr MOSSFIELD—Do you broadcast in Japanese?

Mr Archer—We do, yes.

Mr MOSSFIELD—What is the demand there?

Mr Archer—There is a fairly large population of Japanese people in Darwin. We have a large ethnic population as well. We broadcast in Greek and in a number of languages.

Mr MOSSFIELD—Would you be seeking an extension of your sponsorship period from five minutes, as it is now? I think you said that you are not actually filling the five minutes at the moment.

Mr Archer—No, I do not.

Mr MOSSFIELD—You would not be seeking an extension?

Mr Archer—No. I certainly do not believe that that is the way to go. I come from a commercial background in radio. You can alter what community radio is all about by trying to put too much emphasis on sponsorship. I believe that we have a responsibility to be self-sufficient and that would be my goal for TOP FM. But we also have a role when we have sponsorship. We have to promote those clients. We also have a responsibility to them to ensure that listeners will hear that message. That is important. Certainly in my role as manager we do not try to be commercial, although we do not then try to be totally different either. For example, our volunteer programs are set up by volunteers.

They work within our guidelines. They come to us and the program committee and decide what they want to put together, and we put that on air. Hence we have blues to jazz to rock, whatever it may be. In our general formatting, which goes across the Territory, we are looking at trying to cover everyone. We play world music; we certainly support independent music; and we are being recognised for that as well. We pick up artists who are not necessarily promoted on commercial channels because they do not fit into the top 40 or the contemporary formats, and we play them—not because they are different but because they need the support. That is certainly a strong policy of ours.

Mr JULL—I want to refer to the survey about which you were talking. How recent was that?

Mr Archer—That was done in July last year. To my knowledge there has not been an up to date McNair Anderson survey since 1996. There may have been.

CHAIR—There was one in 1998.

Mr Archer—Right. So if it was done in 1998 we normally do not get included in that. We were probably regarded as ‘other’.

CHAIR—No, you are in this.

Mr Archer—Okay. That one has not managed to make its way to my desk.

Mr HARDGRAVE—You probably have to pay for it.

Mr Archer—Yes, you do. That is probably why.

CHAIR—There is an interesting point though. I do not know how often they do them here, but if you believe that they do them every two years, you dropped rather dramatically on your 1996 figures.

Mr Archer—We would have done that. At that stage, that was prior to me joining TOP FM.

CHAIR—There is a hand at the tiller now?

Mr Archer—Yes, something like that. We were taking at that stage the John Laws program and we certainly we dropped out of that I think in mid-1996. That survey would show when. So I would say that that would account for the huge drop off in the audience.

Mr JULL—Does anybody take Laws now?

Mr Archer—Yes, I think the local commercial MIXFM takes that. There again, we supplement that through our own local presenter. He covers local issues.

CHAIR—Do you do talkback?

Mr Archer—We certainly do—Territory-wide talkback. It is a freecall number. We cover local issues as they come in. We have been able to get ourselves a mobile broadcasting unit which we take out. We take that to areas that need our coverage and to areas where we want to be involved. We have been able to successfully do that and promote the Territory in smaller areas as well. We have been able to tell them what we are and who we represent. I believe that we have a fairly strong following. There are still I things that we can do, but it is not restricted only to funding; it is restricted also to the man hours involved.

Mr HARDGRAVE—When did you run John Laws? At what time of the day was John Laws run?

Mr Archer—At the normal time I believe. It would have been 9.00 a.m. until 12 noon.

CHAIR—Mr Andrew, for how long do you broadcast John Laws?

Mr Andrew—From 9.00 a.m. until midday.

CHAIR—Do you take any other programs like that?

Mr Andrew—No, not to that extent. The only other one we do on MIXFM is Saturday night jukebox from 6.00 until midnight.

CHAIR—We are grappling with this problem. We have visited a number of community stations, and we have a great admiration for them as some of them do very good community announcement work. In fact, in Logan the emergency service profile of the district is built around the community station. But here is the problem. I touched on this at the beginning when I started questioning you. Community stations tell us that they need more money. I do not think we have found one yet that is filling its five minutes. There is the dilemma.

Implicit in you saying that you need money is the fact that, if you are not filling your five minutes, obviously you expect the government to fill some gap there. Can you be more explicit, bearing in mind that you are doing a bigger job than most community stations? What role do you see for government? What do you provide that the ABC and commercial stations are not providing that would make the government want to subsidise not only an ABC and an SBS but also a community network?

Mr Archer—I would like to clarify. I am probably going against other community radio stations, but I do not believe that we should be looking at an increase in the five minutes of sponsorship. Certainly in our case, five minutes is the extent that I would like to see sponsorship covered on community broadcasting.

CHAIR—But if you cannot fill it, is that not a reflection that you do not have a sufficient segment of your community behind you to be economically viable?

Mr Archer—That is right. But if you were to fill it or go above that then I believe you are no longer a community. You are becoming almost commercial.

CHAIR—What is your funding format? What would you recommend that the committee should do?

Mr Archer—I would certainly be asking the committee to look at recommending using community radio as an education tool. I am talking not only about the Territory. I think we need to look more broadly at what we are presenting. In our case we have a role to fulfil. We cannot only inform; we can also educate. There are lots of dollars that are produced in commercial terms, which are put into publications and into other areas that really do not reach the subject that they are trying to reach. There is certainly an area that we can reach on a one-to-one basis, which is not what radio is all about. We talk one to one. Whether we are talking about 1,000 or 100,000, I believe that is a role that we can play. I think it is overlooked. Being involved with indigenous community radio as well, it is something that has been overlooked.

CHAIR—You still have not answered my question. How should the government be helping?

Mr Archer—I think it should be supporting by project-orientated funding.

CHAIR—Projects?

Mr Archer—Yes. Let us look at projects that we can do. I will talk about our own case. We provide programming for many different language groups and for many different age groups. We cannot sit here and say we will cater purely for the 15 to 25 age group. That is not our charter. We are looking at trying to get in some of the younger people. Even our survey showed that we were not doing anything for people who are a bit younger than 25 or 35. So we altered our programming and we put in a program that catered for new music, as we call it—a bit of alternative music. We have had good feedback on that. When we are talking about that I believe that that is education. Literacy is a huge problem in the Territory.

CHAIR—Do you do any literacy or numeracy education on radio?

Mr Archer—No, we do not. All our funding is taken up at the moment on keeping ourselves on the air. We also assist through OCSAT, the Territory Network. For example, when Katherine got hit by floods, the local station down there was washed away. We were first in there with a caravan and we hired a generator to get them up and back on the air. But in the meantime we were providing that emergency service. So that is a role that we play. At GoveFM, at that stage, we had a technician on board. We sent him over there to assist in setting up their new FM station.

So that is certainly a role that we have played. We have taken that on because we believe that is our role as well as being a community station. Yes, we are a hub. Yes, we are sending programs down the line. But we do not take it away. We ask all of those stations, and most of them provide information back to us. So, if anything, we are an axle to which and from which everyone is rotating. That is what I like to think we are.

CHAIR—Mr Archer, thank you for your forthright presentation and for your submission. We trust that, if we need additional information, we can come back to you. You will receive a copy of the Hansard draft in due course which will be available on the Internet in about five or six days time. On that note, thank you once again.

Resolved (on motion by **Mr Hardgrave**):

That the committee authorises the broadcasting of this public hearing and the publication of evidence given before it this day.

CHAIR—I thank all those who attended this morning—the witnesses and members of the public who have come along, members of the media, and those who assisted us in making this information available. It has been our policy to cover Darwin and Western Australia in all our inquiries. We are not disappointed in the quality of evidence that we received today. On that note, I declare this public hearing officially closed.

Committee adjourned at 10.43 a.m.