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Official Committee Hansard

**HOUSE OF
REPRESENTATIVES**

STANDING COMMITTEE ON COMMUNICATIONS,
INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY AND THE ARTS

Reference: Community broadcasting

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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON COMMUNICATIONS, INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY AND THE
ARTS**

Wednesday, 9 August 2006

Members: Miss Jackie Kelly (*Chair*), Ms Owens (*Deputy Chair*), Mrs Bronwyn Bishop, Mr Garrett, Mr Hayes, Mr Johnson, Mr Keenan, Mr Laming, Mr Ticehurst and Ms Vamvakinou

Members in attendance: Mr Hayes, Miss Jackie Kelly, Mr Laming, Ms Owens and Mr Ticehurst

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

To inquire into and report on:

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

WITNESSES

BERKELEY, Mr Leo Robert, Chair, Open Spectrum Australia 1

**RENNIE, Dr Elinor Mary, Research Fellow, Swinburne University; and Committee Member,
Open Spectrum Australia..... 1**

Committee met at 9.10 am**BERKELEY, Mr Leo Robert, Chair, Open Spectrum Australia****RENNIE, Dr Elinor Mary, Research Fellow, Swinburne University; and Committee Member, Open Spectrum Australia**

CHAIR (Miss Jackie Kelly)—I declare open this public hearing of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Communications, Information Technology and the Arts inquiry into community broadcasting. The inquiry arises from requests to this committee by Senator the Hon. Helen Coonan, the federal Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts. Written submissions were called for and 128 have been received to date. The committee is now conducting a program of public hearings and inspections. This hearing is the seventh of the inquiry.

I welcome representatives of Open Spectrum Australia. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that these hearings are formal proceedings of the parliament. Consequently, they warrant the same respect as proceedings of the House itself. It is customary to remind witnesses that giving false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of parliament. It is usual to make a brief statement. We have all received your submission. If you would like to make a brief statement, please do so, and then the committee members will question you.

Mr Berkeley—We would both like to make a short opening statement. I should say at the start that, when we made the submission to this inquiry, our group was called the Community Spectrum Taskforce, but we have recently decided to rename it Open Spectrum Australia. I just clarify that. I thought in my opening statement I should give you some background on who we are. In 2005, Deb Verhoeven and I—and we are both academics at RMIT University in Melbourne, with an interest in community media—had discussions with Channel 31 Melbourne. We became aware that the community television sector's lack of access to digital spectrum was a significant problem. Their inability to simulcast a digital and an analog signal is threatening the impressive recent gains community television has made in the quality and scope of its programming and the growth in the audience it is reaching.

In response to this and in collaboration with Channel 31 Melbourne, with whom RMIT has had a long relationship, we organised a symposium titled Building a Vision for the Community Use of Digital Spectrum. That was held in December 2005. We invited around 30 people we identified as having the background and expertise to contribute to a discussion on this issue, and they were from a diverse range of fields. They included technical experts, mainstream television practitioners, media academics, screen culture representatives and leaders within the broader community. Virtually everyone we invited attended and contributed to the event with enthusiasm and commitment. One outcome of this symposium was a discussion paper written by Eli Rennie, which has been widely circulated nationally and internationally and which also formed the basis of our submission to this inquiry.

Another significant outcome was the formation of the Community Spectrum Taskforce, the membership of which was decided by the people who attended the symposium. The task force, which has recently been renamed Open Spectrum Australia, is composed of nine people. We

have a shared belief in the important role community media play within the Australian media and an interest in raising public awareness about this role. We strongly believe in diversity within the media and that people need to feel their lives, their views and their communities are reflected in what they see on television. In an increasingly globalised, networked and syndicated media environment, we also believe that community TV is an essential contributor to this diversity.

Since our submission to this inquiry, we have been involved in a number of activities. In June we met with national CTV station managers to discuss a national position on the transition to digital TV. We also met with Jen Levy from DCITA, who briefed us on the options the government is considering in relation to this issue. Through all of these activities, we have become convinced that there is great potential in the community use of digital television that has not been sufficiently explored. In our opinion, a broader inquiry on this issue is needed to investigate and report on ways to realise this potential. This is an issue that Eli will discuss in more detail when she speaks.

From our point of view, the analog switch-off is the key date. At that time a significant amount of spectrum will become available, and we believe the Australian public will be expecting a considerable level of diversity in their broadcast television experience.

In our opinion, a community multiplex using seven megahertz of this spectrum to present the range of material outlined in our submission would be an excellent way to create this diversity within the Australian media. However, it is also vital that the gains community TV has made in relation to audience and quality are not lost in the period between now and analog switch-off through not allowing an effective simulcast arrangement and mishandling the transition to digital broadcasting. To our group, community TV is only going to become more important in the coming years. The Australian government's Digital Content Industry Action Agenda report released this year confirms the exponential growth of digital content production in this country, which includes television and video. We live in an increasingly media literate society where a large and growing number of ordinary people have the ability to produce what would previously be regarded as professional quality media. These are both the program makers and the audience for community TV in the future and their desire for access to broadcast spectrum is only going to become stronger.

Dr Rennie—I was invited to work on the discussion paper for Open Spectrum Australia because of research I have been doing since 2001 into community broadcasting around the world, which I am happy to discuss too. Out of that research I found that Australia is a pioneer in the area of community broadcasting. We have a robust sector that is impressive in its diversity, its size and its levels of local content production. Australia is therefore ideally positioned to create successful and viable community media across digital platforms. In fact we must ensure that community broadcasting makes that transition to digital otherwise Australians will be losing out on what we already have with a highly valued and integral part of our media sphere. If we get it wrong, then the consequences will be felt culturally, economically and socially.

At the culture level we will experience a lack of diversity and localism in broadcasting. We need community broadcasting to ensure that our communities are accessible, visible and indeed enjoyable. At the economic level, if we do not have community broadcasting on digital platforms, then it will impact upon the media industries as a whole, and it will have

consequences for the knowledge economy. Community based media is now recognised as a primary source of innovation in the creative industries. It is not enough to leave user generated innovation to the periphery of our media platforms. Well-managed, accessible communications bases are necessary to make the most of this activity.

Community TV will be left behind unless it is given the capacity to perform to these new broadcasting standards that will come about as a result of digital TV, such as high definition. Effectively, community TV will be locked into an out-of-date analog style of broadcasting in a new media environment. This will be to the detriment of the television industry at large as community TV will not be able to train its volunteers in these new technologies and content forms. Socially, if we do not allow community TV to make a viable transition, our not-for-profit service based groups, our civil society, will not be able to connect with its constituencies in the way it is currently doing or to expand on that activity as more and more groups and sectors of our society make use of media.

Community media also has educative benefits for individuals, learning via media participation, which we need to hold onto. I think it is also worth stating that broadcast spaces remain the primary means of reaching the public. We need non-profit media across all platforms, including hand-held television devices, when they come, and our cable and satellite pay TV services, whether retransmission or new spaces. Most importantly, regional Australia requires local content and the ability for its communities to express themselves.

Two questions come out of all of that: how do we ensure that community media makes a viable transition and what would digital community broadcasting consist of? To date, government policy has only considered the current community TV services. The policy promise—which is not a reality yet—that limits these stations to one standard definition channel is one example of that. It is our belief that digital TV is potentially better suited to community use than analog TV was. It allows for informational programming, including data delivery and niche services. It presents new ways of governing and funding channels, autonomous channels, for different communities. It overcomes fuzzy transmission issues and it will allow an opportunity for channels to be available to all communities nationally across the country.

In terms of the transition period, we do support the CBAA's position. We think that community TV should be carried by SBS in the short term, until digital's switch-off, not a datacaster. If it is carried on SBS, then we will have the ability to have community TV services for the first time in regional Australia. The BA model is possibly also going to be inflated in terms of price because it is a commercial service, which either the sector or the government will end up paying for.

So why community multiplex? Digital TV can bring new partners into the digital TV space via this community user spectrum. In our submission we have outlined what those communities are—cultural, education, youth, Indigenous, possibly even e-government citizen deliberation spaces. It allows for new content forms, which might be short and easier to produce than current services, via digital production equipment. For instance, you might have civil society groups putting membership forms, or more information about their organisation, via data onto that channel. It also allows us to review the current model of community broadcasting, including the licence category, which at the moment does not allow for any of the things that we have proposed in our submission.

We think that as a result the minister should allocate funds towards a comprehensive inquiry into the possibilities of community multiplex using seven megahertz of digital spectrum, which should address the following issues. It should address timing. Should spectrum be allocated at switch-off or sooner? If we leave it till switch-off, what will be the consequences? It should address details of the transition plan. It should address partnerships and participants. Who would participate in a community multiplex? We need to determine the interests, needs and possibilities there. It should address funding. How would a community multiplex be funded via a possible leasing out of part of the spectrum to a commercial provider or direct government funding? It should address licensing. What changes are required to the Broadcasting Services Act to establish a community multiplex? How would it be managed? What are the government's models required? It should address regional stations. What models do we need to look at for viable regional television stations, including shared programming streams?

In conclusion, we are proposing a thorough reconsideration of the community broadcasting structure in light of digital broadcasting. This is already occurring for the national and commercial sectors in terms of new entrants, more channels and new services. All of these issues have been addressed or will be addressed in the current round of inquiries. Community broadcasting will be transformed by digital broadcasting one way or the other. We need to ensure that that transformation is the best possible transformation in the Australian public interest.

CHAIR—You have mentioned a number of opportunities for gaining access to the digital spectrum, such community multiplex, spectrum allocations, seven megahertz channels or a single channel. What is your preferred option? What is the ideal option?

Dr Rennie—The ideal option would be for the government to put aside a seven megahertz channel now rather than allocating it to be auctioned off to new entrants into the broadcasting or datacasting markets.

CHAIR—Why seven megahertz? Why not an SD channel?

Dr Rennie—There are a number of reasons.

CHAIR—Do you have the ability to broadcast in HD? Do you have the content?

Dr Rennie—Not yet. The stations have the capacity for digital transmission, other than the transmission facilities. HD equipment is very expensive at the moment. The community sector does not have that capacity. I think the Indigenous sector will have that capacity very soon as a result of the \$48.5 million allocated towards Indigenous production. I can see some high-end TV production coming out of that. We are certainly considering the future of Indigenous TV in our proposal.

Mr Berkeley—I think Melbourne Channel 31 has the capacity to be digital all the way through to the transmission stage. And I think Sydney is set up for that as well.

CHAIR—But why seven megahertz? Why not just an SD channel, particularly if you are going to MPEG4? There are opportunities to crunch things a bit.

Dr Rennie—It has not been determined if we are going to MPEG4.

CHAIR—Why does everyone always come asking for seven megahertz?

Dr Rennie—For us it is an issue of parity as well.

Ms OWENS—You were saying that there are opportunities out there which the current licence category does not allow for. It sounds like there are other possibilities that community television really is not exploring yet because the potential is not there. Can you expand on that a little?

Dr Rennie—For instance, with the cultural institutions and the new cultural broadband network, there will be a lot of content that comes out which might be able to be showcased on a digital TV channel. At the moment, that is not considered a community and would not be given a community broadcasting licence, but that does not mean that it could not be a third sector, non-profit service for the public in the kind of model we are proposing.

CHAIR—Couldn't those programs be carried on an existing community channel?

Dr Rennie—Exactly. They could be. I think that these are the types of issues that we would need to have addressed—for instance, if they want their own kind of licence and governance. The education sector has had an interesting, slightly uneasy relationship with community broadcasters. Some universities have gone onto consortiums, as RMITV has. It is not necessarily the most ideal model. All we are proposing is that these things need to be investigated.

Mr HAYES—Is that where you got an interest in datacasting, in relation to education?

Dr Rennie—I think education would be a really interesting service on digital TV. You could have coursework pretty much delivered via TV, with normal programming but also with supplementary activities.

Mr Berkeley—The whole issue of the seven megahertz is really about community TV being able to function in terms of drawing audiences. They need to offer an equivalent service to what the other broadcasters do. So I think they will have to broadcast in HD, and I think they want to. The cost of all of that technology is coming down significantly. We have HD cameras at RMIT. So even though they are not doing it or not planning to do it at the moment, community TV need to have that capacity so that people do not view them as the poor relation. That has been the situation in the past: the fuzzy picture syndrome. For instance, now in Melbourne Channel 31 presents programming that looks pretty much as good as everyone else's and it draws audiences.

Mr HAYES—Production is not the issue. Most people produce in SD in any event. The reception is what is going to be of some significance.

Mr Berkeley—Yes, but I guess that is an issue for all of the broadcasters.

CHAIR—I do not think community is producing in HD, except for the Indigenous sector.

Dr Rennie—Indigenous TV is an interesting one. They have wanted a different licence category for some time anyhow, which is why I think the licence category needs to be reviewed

as well. I think there is a lot of high-end Indigenous production already and there will be a lot more as a result of the new funding.

CHAIR—In the remaining community sector they have digitised, but it is really just digital storage of an analog signal or analog production.

Dr Rennie—Yes. Well, it has to be at the moment.

CHAIR—Yes.

Dr Rennie—They are certainly producing with digital cameras and in digital format.

CHAIR—But it is not HD?

Dr Rennie—No.

Ms OWENS—There is no point in that.

Dr Rennie—There would be no point, exactly. It is an expensive way to produce TV.

CHAIR—But you are not moving to acquiring that sort of equipment and predicting HD broadcast?

Dr Rennie—Possibly one day. The way the government has structured the whole digital broadcasting plan is based upon this assumption that HD is going to become the standard broadcast. They have made that claim. They have structured the entire thing in that direction. To say that community TV is not allowed to be part of that digital landscape that they have created is completely unfair.

Mr Berkeley—There is HD and HD; it depends which method you want to choose.

Dr Rennie—Yes, and there are other ways that you can use digital TV. For instance, there are different types of interactivity or ways of hanging other content off it—downloadable content or whatever. Those are forms which we have not really explored in Australia because of the way that digital TV has been set up. To do that I think you would need more than a standard definition channel.

CHAIR—The recent media reforms announced by the minister specified analog switch-off, but at the same time, not mandated HD and mentioned simulcasts. So if you go to simulcast you cannot do HD. There is some opportunity there. Do you see the future of television being in HD or do you think it is probably more likely that everyone is going to go to multichannelling on SD?

Dr Rennie—Personally, I do not think that the future of TV is in HD. I think that is a fabrication, and that makes the HD issue slightly redundant. If it is a multichannel environment then the third sector should also have the capacity to multichannel, one way or the other.

CHAIR—Multichannel. So within the community's 7 MHz you would envision two or three community stations?

Dr Rennie—Yes.

CHAIR—And what would be the make-up of those stations? Expand a bit on the civil society organisations. How does that concept work? Give me a concrete example: is it Friends of the Earth?

Dr Rennie—Sure. At the moment, looking at some of the most popular examples of community TV production, you see stuff like the nursing program or the arthritis aerobics exercise program. These are programs which are made by civil society not-for-profit organisations for the public good, and they are popular because you do not get that type of content on TV. For instance, in another project that I work on the Salvation Army is one of the main partners. That is a youth radio project.

CHAIR—And what is the content like for that?

Dr Rennie—It has not started yet but it is going to be working with homeless youth to do an access program in the student youth network radio station in Melbourne to teach them. It is a new approach towards education via media participation. I think it would be fascinating to see content made by Salvation Army workers or the communities that they serve. It would be an insight into a part of Australia that not many of us see. That is just one small example. So we are talking about the sectors that provide caring, charity, and intellectual or political debate and discourse in this country.

CHAIR—So would you see the Liberal and Labor parties running their own programs—civics or something—or are you thinking more of the non-profit organisations?

Dr Rennie—There has certainly been interest at the state government level in community TV services. I personally think that governments are not very good at doing media. But maybe community TV is the bridge that is needed so that communities work for citizens' deliberation within a media environment.

Ms OWENS—So, as well as entertainment and the social side of things, you are talking about the delivery of information to niche groups for particular purposes?

Dr Rennie—Yes. And there has not really developed—

Ms OWENS—Take the Centrelink program and the new welfare-to-work legislation, for example. You would never broadcast that on commercial television but it would be a really effective way to deliver that information at 11 o'clock in the morning.

CHAIR—That has been raised by other groups: that a fair whack of government advertising should be on community TV that is representative of audiences. That would be a way of funding it, by guaranteeing that sponsorship. To provide those sorts of ads would provide some certainty of funding from the government.

Ms OWENS—So it is niche delivery as well.

Dr Rennie—Yes. I think what we are talking about goes beyond advertising government services. It is probably more similar to e-government than advertising.

CHAIR—You would really then need to recharter the thing, wouldn't you? We had one example where they did an interview with someone about their CD and mentioned that it was available locally and—

Ms OWENS—I think that is the licence category issue—that once you start to accept that there is this ability to deliver stuff live as well as by podcasting, because you produce it by the way, then the current idea of one station is not sufficient. The options grow exponentially if you are looking at delivery of all kinds of content and services for small groups that a commercial station simply would not service.

CHAIR—How would you define that licence category without the commercials standing up and saying, 'That is just a commercial station'?

Dr Rennie—For a start, they would all be not-for-profit services.

CHAIR—But you could still take away a lot of the audience share from the commercials, obviously.

Ms OWENS—Then the commercials could do it as well.

Dr Rennie—If there were a real commercial incentive to do it, the commercials would be doing it.

Ms OWENS—The commercials do that now; if you come up with a good program concept, they take it. And they market it better.

Dr Rennie—We see that as research and development for the television industries. I do not think that that is a bad thing. I think it would be a good thing if they would take some of the innovations that come out of the community sector.

Ms OWENS—Do you think there is a group out there in the community sector that is really waiting for the technology so they can explore the technical side of things—technical innovation, form innovation?

Mr Berkeley—I think so. I have thought for a long time that community TV provides a fantastic opportunity for program and content innovation within the Australian industry. It does that to some extent already. It certainly has a very important role in training. A lot of the universities around Australia that teach television production have close relationships with community TV.

I think there are interesting links between the future of community TV and the Digital Content Industry Action Agenda report. I know that is an industry agenda, but that report identified R&D and training as key priorities for growing the digital content industry in Australia. It does not

mention community TV, but I think there are really good opportunities for community TV to have that role in relation to digital television that have not really been explored.

CHAIR—Do you get any other recognition for the training role that you have? Are there any other concrete examples of where you have been recognised for your training role?

Mr Berkeley—Not really, although I am not sure what you mean by ‘recognition’.

CHAIR—Like are mentioned in that report.

Mr Berkeley—No, they did not really focus too much on broadcasting; it was much more focused on online. But when you look at the recommendations and the focus, they include television as part of digital content. You could really see a role for community TV. It would have to be developed and thought through, but it could have a role in training. Take the huge numbers of young people coming through with production skills and an interest in working in that area. You could have community TV not only as a site where industry could do interesting R&D projects but also as a site where training could occur.

CHAIR—What percentage of the people going through your sector move on to the commercial sector?

Dr Rennie—In the other research project I am doing, I am looking at youth radio. SYNFM have been broadcasting since 2003 and their rough estimation—and I have names and facts and figures—is that, since 2003, 50 to 70 people have moved on to working in the professional media industries.

CHAIR—From one radio station?

Dr Rennie—From one radio station.

CHAIR—Over three years.

Dr Rennie—Yes. For TV we have not calculated the numbers, but they are significant.

Mr Berkeley—People often talk about the on-air presenters, like Rove, who have done it. But if you look at the behind-the-scenes people who have come through community TV—and, again, it is only anecdotal—it is significant. I am in charge of the media degree at RMIT, which does film and TV.

CHAIR—Are there any TV awards or something like that where people have recognised that role or mentioned it?

Ms OWENS—No, but there is anecdotal stuff.

CHAIR—It is always anecdotal. What is your anecdotal evidence for your audience? What do you guys think the audience of community TV is?

Dr Rennie—There are real figures for the audience. Market research has been done into that, and I think it is three million people. I think it is outlined in the Community Broadcasting Association's submission.

CHAIR—In radio or TV?

Mr TICEHURST—How many broadcasting stations do you have around Australia?

Dr Rennie—TV stations?

Mr TICEHURST—Community broadcasters.

Dr Rennie—Including radio stations?

Mr TICEHURST—No, TV.

Dr Rennie—In TV we have stations currently broadcasting in Melbourne, Sydney, Perth, Brisbane, Adelaide, Lismore and Mount Gambier. I know for a fact there would be more, because there have been other applications, but Senator Alston revoked the six-spectrum reservation in 1998. Originally there was a nationwide reservation of that spectrum. He took it back for digital broadcasting planning, so now a lot of communities do not have the spectrum.

Mr TICEHURST—Who operates them?

Dr Rennie—They are generally operated as consortiums of different community groups, which might include universities but which are mostly community based, not-for-profit organisations.

CHAIR—Do the most successful ones include an educational institution?

Dr Rennie—Yes, in some capacity. At RMIT it is actually a student group. It is RMITV, not RMIT. RMITV came out of the student union, didn't it?

Mr Berkeley—Yes, that is right. I think most people regard Melbourne as the most successful station at the moment. That has a large number of member groups, and one of them is RMITV, but that is a student group. It is not a formal group of the university. They elect their members every year.

Mr TICEHURST—Say we talk about a place like Lismore. What type of audience would you have there? Is that run out of a university?

Dr Rennie—No. Lismore is actually not a great example, because there is an extremely small population that could possibly receive it. I think it is about 23,000. What they struggle with, from my knowledge, is this. They do not have enough content or enough sponsors to run a viable station. The people in Mount Gambier, Bush Vision, have come up with a model that could potentially resolve that. It would be a regional community programming feed so that regional stations—that is, community stations that have more in common with each other than they do with their city counterpart stations—could share content and that content would be funded via

national level sponsors, such as the Australian Wheat Board, the dairy union and those kinds of organisations. In that type of model, with programming feeds, you would have a local licence, say, in Lismore, Newcastle or wherever and that town would have the capacity to insert its own local programming into the program feed. They would have 24-hour TV with, say, an hour a day—or maybe more—of their own content.

Mr TICEHURST—Who are your main audience participants?

Dr Rennie—That is very hard to say. What is our audience demographic?

Mr TICEHURST—Say a station is coming out of a university base in a capital city. That audience is probably very different from what you have, say, for a station coming out of Mount Gambier or Lismore. They could be typical of regional areas, but I guess there is a difference.

Mr Berkeley—I think one of the features of community TV is that the audience is as diverse as the programming. The metropolitan stations have programs that reflect the interests of university students, but they also have really popular programs for disabled people and for four-wheel drive enthusiasts. That won a most popular program award, the viewers' choice award, at the last awards. One of the features is that it is extremely diverse and it reflects the diversity in the community.

Dr Rennie—I think the audiences would be fairly niche in the same way that the programming is, but when you put them all together there is a significant number of people.

Mr TICEHURST—If you look at, say, Newcastle university, they run their own community radio. That has a pretty good reach. I listen on the Central Coast at certain times on weekends to various programs they run. If they were going to, say, set up a community TV station digitally, what costs would be involved?

Dr Rennie—There would be a substantial transmission cost, which I am not sure has been completely costed if it was for a community multiplex. If it was for carriage on someone else's multiplex, it might be in the order of \$5 million over five years. I think that is a figure that has been thrown around, but don't quote me on that. The CBAA have figures on that, as far as I know. Then there would be costs also at the level of the station itself, although, as Melbourne has already demonstrated, those costs are completely achievable. The stations claim that they could run a digital station or an analog station but would struggle to run both at the same time in a simulcast arrangement.

Mr TICEHURST—You made a comment in your opening speech about perhaps using SBS, doing a multiplex with SBS. SBS is already taxpayer funded, so that probably would be a good opportunity if you wanted to broaden out the scope of community TV.

Dr Rennie—Yes. I imagine there would be some cost to government for that, in that SBS would expect something back for carriage of community TV. But I am not sure.

CHAIR—Has any work been done on what would be the cheapest?

Dr Rennie—SBS.

CHAIR—So that would be the cheapest—for government or for community? So it is cheaper to say, ‘Run out on the SBS multiplex,’ rather than, ‘Here is seven megahertz; you go do whatever you’re going to do’?

Dr Rennie—Yes.

Mr TICEHURST—It has got to be cheaper on SBS, because the taxpayer is already paying for that. If you are going to have a separate channel—

CHAIR—But then SBS want some money—

Ms OWENS—Not if SBS had other options. There might be an opportunity cost there.

Mr TICEHURST—Sure. There would be an opportunity cost. You get nothing for nothing.

Dr Rennie—There would be an opportunity cost. We suspect there might be other ways of funding a multiplex if you brought other partners into the community multiplex, such as the education sector or the cultural institutions or the Indigenous TV sector. That could provide other models for funding. We have also suggested that you could actually lease off part of that spectrum to a datacaster so that that would fund the multiplex. There has not been a lot of enthusiasm for that proposal.

CHAIR—I think the only people interested in that datacasting spectrum are BA, and they are getting pricier and pricier as they try to make money back on their investment. But if the spectrum went elsewhere then there would be an opportunity for BA to—

Mr TICEHURST—What opportunities do you have on IPTV?

Dr Rennie—I think this is going to be a very important development and that our community sector needs to be getting in on IPTV straightaway. I do not think that means that we can give up on our free-to-air broadcast platforms, though, because there is still a substantial audience on those platforms—although there may not be in 10 years time, the way things are going. It may be that free-to-air TV will be redundant. But I do not think that we can make that assumption for the not-for-profit community sector if we are not making it for the other sectors.

Mr TICEHURST—It is a way of getting into digital content provision before the switch-off from analog.

Dr Rennie—I think IPTV may work best as a multiplatform option where you have content showcased on broadcast platforms and then you could have a lot of other content on IPTV that you direct viewers to. Look at some of the programs that are already podcasting over the internet, like *The Ugly Stick*, which is a community TV program in Melbourne. I do not think that their podcasts would be anywhere near as successful as they are if they did not have that free-to-air audience and the publicity that comes with that. It is very hard to find community content on the internet; it is much easier to find it on TV.

Mr TICEHURST—If you are in range.

Dr Rennie—Yes.

Mr Berkeley—The way the whole media environment seems to be going is towards multiplatform delivery, and people expect to be able to access shows they are interested in through a variety of means. Our position is that community TV should not be marginalised compared to other sectors.

CHAIR—Have you made any attempts to negotiate retransmission deals with pay TV providers?

Dr Rennie—There have been attempts. We have not, because that is not what we do. There have been substantial negotiations between the CTV sector and the pay TV operators, but they have not succeeded. The pay TV operators have not been interested in retransmitting community TV. In fact, they have actively gone around and disconnected the antennas from people's homes when they install pay TV so that people cannot easily get back to their broadcast platform to watch community TV.

CHAIR—You mentioned 'new spaces'.

Dr Rennie—What is my terminology there? I think what I mean is—

Ms OWENS—Public spaces.

Dr Rennie—Public spaces, public commons across different media platforms.

Ms OWENS—Virtual town squares.

Dr Rennie—Exactly, yes—which community TV currently is, but it is quite confined in its current form. Digital TV gives us the opportunity to restructure that in a more equitable way.

CHAIR—You get that, obviously.

Ms OWENS—I do, yes. It is just a terminology of saying that people need spaces in which to meet. People meet around fountains and coffee shops and things like that, but they also meet through other ways of communications, through media as well—through local newspapers. They share information. Information flows through public spaces and you need public spaces on the airwaves as well so the information can flow, leaders can emerge and voices and opinions can be generated from the community itself—not from the advertiser driven megacompanies but from the community. Ideas can come from the ground up and flow through communities.

Mr Berkeley—Partly for production cost reasons, there is a lot of talk on community TV, but often it is really good talk. It is, say, the northern suburbs of Melbourne and people get together and discuss issues that are relevant to them. That is a very common type of programming on community TV but it is a very successful type and people seem to be interested in it.

Dr Rennie—The internet has been an interesting example of what happens when you create a new public space, because the technology of the internet has been designed so that it is end to end, so anybody can participate without some kind of central control or permission from anyone.

As a result, we have had this amazing innovation which has had all kinds of economic and social benefits. What we are saying is that you can create similar benefits out of broadcast spaces if you design them appropriately.

CHAIR—But you are not holding your breath on pay TV.

Dr Rennie—We think what needs to happen with pay TV is retransmission.

CHAIR—And that must carry—

Dr Rennie—Yes, that needs to be mandated by government. They need to be told to carry community TV.

Mr TICEHURST—Why would they? It is a commercial service. You cannot mandate them to carry—

Dr Rennie—They carry the other free-to-air stations.

Mr TICEHURST—But not all of them. That is under a deal, though. There is a commercial arrangement.

Dr Rennie—Not with all of them, I don't think.

CHAIR—I think 7 is still in court and I think 10 pays.

Dr Rennie—But you can still receive it. Even if you do not get the electronic program guide for all the free-to-air stations on pay TV, you can actually flick through and find them quite easily, but you will not find community TV on your pay TV service.

Ms OWENS—I am going to ask a question that I already know the answer to, but it is good to get it on the record again. If community television is left where it is, without digital spectrum, until this switch-off date, which is the current plan, as I understand it, what are the ramifications for current community television stations and why?

Dr Rennie—If the current community TV stations are not given simulcast—is that what you mean?

Ms OWENS—Yes.

Dr Rennie—They will cease to function. They will lose their audience. The only other possible arrangement would be a direct switch-over at some point during the transition phase, and the most obvious time for that to happen would be when the digital market gets to 50 per cent. So when we are at 50 per cent, you turn off Channel 31 analog and you switch on Channel 31 digital. They have still lost half their audience. They cannot economically function that way. There is no viability in them having half the current audience.

Ms OWENS—They lose their audience because, technically, a person cannot get community television once they have gone digital?

Mr Berkeley—They can, but they have to repatch the cables at the back of their TV and the vast majority of people, even technically savvy ones, will not do that or do not want to do it.

Dr Rennie—You have, effectively, to be switching from analog to digital in order to be able to go back and get the analog signal.

Ms OWENS—So, at the moment, as people go digital and cable, they get removed from accessing community television?

Mr Berkeley—They stop watching.

Dr Rennie—Yes.

CHAIR—I am just converting back to megabits per second. They always want seven megahertz, don't they? An SD channel is only six to eight megabits per second. Why are you not making a claim for six to eight megabits per second to simulcast somewhere squished in there? Most people are only buying standard definition set-top boxes at the moment, anyway, even to simulcast. You do not have any HD content. Besides the Indigenous sector, you are unlikely to get any HD broadcast capability, so you will not need seven megahertz, unless it is to simulcast multiple community TVs which, currently, we struggle to get up in our major metropolitan areas. What is wrong with a sliver of six to eight megabits per second?

Mr Berkeley—I guess the seven megahertz is our preferred option.

CHAIR—Why?

Mr Berkeley—Because of the equity issue with other broadcasters.

CHAIR—Don't worry, we are after seven megahertz back from the commercial channels.

Ms OWENS—There are two issues here, aren't there?

Dr Rennie—There are.

Ms OWENS—There is the simulcast period, then there is the future possibility issue.

Mr Berkeley—That is true. I think a TV has to have seven megahertz after analog switch-off.

CHAIR—But, in the next six years, realistically, you could only ever use six to eight megahertz per second?

Dr Rennie—Yes.

CHAIR—Plus I think you need the electronic program guide?

Mr TICEHURST—The standard channel is seven megahertz. It would be a bit ridiculous to create a separate one just for community TV. It would be a bit like having a three-foot six-rail

gauge. If the standard is seven, then you have seven for everyone, otherwise you create an anomaly that you do not need. The fact that you cannot use it all right now is not really an issue.

Ms OWENS—The 6.8 would not allow the exploration, the training, new technology and new forms, either. It would restrict it to what is at the moment analog television on a digital spectrum—

Dr Rennie—That is exactly right.

Ms OWENS—whereas ultimately it will be digital television in a different form. Six years of no progress on that.

CHAIR—But, with compression technologies et cetera moving to MPEG4—all of those sorts of things—I have seen a lot of spectrum grabbing in the last 10 years. Could community television share a full channel with the new national Indigenous television service?

Dr Rennie—In the short term, it certainly could.

CHAIR—Say, in the next six years or in the next 12 years?

Dr Rennie—That is difficult to anticipate. Until switch-off, I think that community services and Indigenous TV could certainly share a full seven megahertz channel and that that would be sufficient. After switch-off, I am not sure where those two sectors will be at at that point in terms of their production capacity. We would then probably also have a greater demand from other sectors of society wanting to get broadcast capability. I think the transition issue is certainly an important one. I believe that SBS will still maintain viable services until switch-off. It may mean that community TV or Indigenous TV is not as advanced as it might otherwise be by switch-off, but it is better than nothing. That is our position on it.

CHAIR—So do you see simulcast continuing beyond switch-off or do you see multichannelling beyond switch-off?

Dr Rennie—At switch-off it just becomes multichannelling for everybody.

CHAIR—Including community stations. So you would like to see three community TV stations in the metropolitan areas. Is there any scope at all for the community to physically get that sort of content?

Mr Berkeley—I guess that is why we are talking about a multiplex. It not only will be what we currently regard as community TV but will include new entrants. It could include Indigenous TV, but it could also include the government sectors or the educational sectors. Just in relation to the educational area, there is great scope for universities to use what digital TV offers. When we talk about a multiplex, that is really what we mean.

CHAIR—Have you spoken with SBS? Is there that sort of capability in their multiplex? You are not just talking about one extra channel, but an Indigenous one, a community one, an educational one, an e-government one, a civics one et cetera.

Mr Berkeley—When we talk about the multiplex, we are not talking about carriage with SBS.

Dr Rennie—Yes.

Mr Berkeley—It would be with one of the datacasting channels—one of the current ones—

Dr Rennie—Either we have carriage on SBS or on a datacaster. We prefer SBS, because of the regional ability that SBS has that BA does not have, because BA is only going to datacast into the cities. Effectively, the bush region would not have a digital signal, and neither would Lismore if we went to BA.

Ms OWENS—And Channel 31 wants to go regional as well.

Dr Rennie—Channel 31 needs to go regional probably more than any other service, because bush communities are seriously neglected in terms of local media. Community TV provides far more local content. Channel 31 in Melbourne provides more local content than all the commercial networks combined.

CHAIR—So SBS would be required to retransmit Channel 31, say. Have you talked to SBS about their ability to do that and anything extra?

Dr Rennie—SBS can do it, but they would need to be made to do it. They are not going to offer it up. That would be a standard definition channel on SBS. It would not be multiple channels on SBS, because they only have the capacity for a limited number of channels—three to four. It would be one channel on SBS.

Ms OWENS—Just to put that—

CHAIR—So SBS is not your preferred option?

Ms OWENS—SBS is the only option for regional areas—is that what you are saying?

Dr Rennie—For the transition phase. The other option is that the government installs community multiplexes across the country so that we can all have a full seven megahertz channel. That—

CHAIR—Can't we give you the seven megahertz and then you go and fund your own multiplex?

Ms OWENS—Sorry; I am not clear on that. If you had the seven megahertz so that you could do the multiplexes and you did that through BA, would it go to regional areas?

Dr Rennie—Do you mean if we used a datacaster as a means to fund our transmissions?

Ms OWENS—Yes.

Dr Rennie—That is an option which has not seriously been considered at all. We could not do that with BA in the short term. It would not be possible. It depends what other services are likely to come out of digital TV. Transmission towers may go up everywhere for handheld devices. I do not know yet; no-one knows—although the minister might know. What the intentions are for those two extra channels have not been made public at the moment.

Ms OWENS—So SBS would get you into the regional areas in the short run, and in the long run, who knows?

Dr Rennie—This is why we need to do further investigation into how it would be funded, because there is not enough known about future digital TV services in general for us to be able to make a proper model, unfortunately.

CHAIR—Thank you very much, Leo and Elinor. I think we will talk to some SBS technicians. You have given us a lot of options there, I suppose. We will have to go from A to B. I will try and download the AB stick and have a try at iPodding community TV.

Resolved (on motion by **Ms Owens**, seconded by **Mr Ticehurst**):

That, pursuant to the power conferred by paragraph (o) of sessional order 28B, this committee authorises publication of the evidence given before it at public hearing this day.

Committee adjourned at 10.05 am