

## **Submission**

**by the Australian Indigenous Communications Association (AICA)  
to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Communications,  
Information Technology and the Arts**

### **Inquiry into Community Broadcasting**

#### ***Scope and role of Australian community broadcasting across radio, television, the internet and other broadcasting technologies***

The Australian Indigenous communications broadcasting services sector (radio and television) is undoubtedly the largest linked network within the community broadcasting services available in this country.

The footprint in terms of location and infrastructure i.e. actual points of delivery is huge. Most importantly the Indigenous sector provides the primary (the only) communications link capability for both television and radio services for a large number of remote communities

Without this network and infrastructure a large number of remote communities would not have access to such an important means of communications available to them as enjoyed by most Australians.

The Indigenous community broadcasting sector has evolved and developed to ensure that such access is essential. Communications services are in place and the delivery of their operation are a primary part of each community's social and economic development.

The Indigenous broadcasting sector is primarily housed under the community broadcasting law and as such are very much a strong and efficient component of the community broadcasting sector in this country.

The major national broadcaster's, (ABC and SBS) programs are delivered through Indigenous owned and operated infrastructure in remote Australia – this is provided without any contribution towards operational or maintenance costs that are required to maintain and sustain the infrastructure.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander owned and controlled community broadcasting services receive partial funding through the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts (DCITA). Most of the media organisations were established by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Commission (ATSIC) who recognised the valued contribution of Indigenous media to Indigenous communities and Australia in general. When ATSIC was dissolved over \$16m was allocated to the Indigenous broadcasting program. ATSIC Commissioners made this significant allocation, despite large, unmet demand for other infrastructure and essential services.

It is of critical importance that DCITA continue to support the ongoing development of Indigenous broadcasting and increase (or at the least maintain) the level of funding currently available for the Indigenous broadcasting program.

There are many good things about the existing services, for example:

:

They comprise

- Over 153 Indigenous community radio/television stations in remote areas, self-organised into eight regional networks, now known as Remote Indigenous Broadcasting Services (RIBS); and
- Five (5) capital city community radio stations – Sydney, Brisbane, Darwin, Melbourne and Perth.
- Twenty (20) Indigenous community radio stations based in regional centres such as Cairns, Alice Springs, Broome and Port Augusta to name a few.
- Generally there is very strong community support and involvement.
- They provide many Indigenous people with part-time or full-time employment. These broadcasters have the potential to even further the line to do both social and economic development within any of our Indigenous communities where there are few or no employment opportunities for Indigenous Australians.
- They provide training in the range of broadcasting skills. They are an important element of the economic structure of Indigenous communities. The majority of Indigenous broadcasters are paid through the Community Development Employment Project (CDEP).
- AICA considers this an important distinction between Indigenous community broadcasters and ‘mainstream’ community broadcasters in that, for most Indigenous broadcasters, the income they derive from broadcasting is their only income, whereas, most other community broadcasters have other paid employment.
- For many Indigenous communities, the Indigenous community radio station is the *primary* broadcasting services, as it is through their local community station that they receive most of their news and information. In Northern Australia, Indigenous community radio provides a vital service to the communities they serve. In times of natural disasters they are most likely the only local information provider. Indigenous media is indeed an “essential service”.

- They are a very cost-effective tool for self-management, capacity-building, and be a very strong partner in their local community's economic development.
- They are a very powerful communication media, especially in traditional communities, where written English is sometimes a third or fourth language. Face-to-face communication in the local languages is most effective, and local radio broadcasts in local languages, containing relevant Indigenous news and music is most cost-effective.

Governments trying to communicate crucial messages to Indigenous communities – in areas such as health, education and social services – often find that their awareness campaigns are largely ineffective. They are ineffective because they do not reach Indigenous communities or, when they do, they are not easily understood. This is a particularly acute problem in remote areas, largely due to low literacy levels and English being most peoples' second, third or fourth language. Accordingly, many communities are unaware that relevant government programs even exist; hence, they are unable to gain access to them.

Significantly, where programs have been delivered/promoted via Indigenous radio services, they have been reported to have been effective. This, however, has been a rare occurrence. We understand that a major obstacle to more frequent use by government agencies of Indigenous media networks is the lack of appreciation and understanding on Indigenous radio by the media agencies that the Government contracts to manage its information and public awareness campaigns. They simply believe that Indigenous media is “not a good buy” and continue to engage mainstream media to broadcast Indigenous campaigns, irrespective of their failure to communicate effectively with Indigenous communities.

Many Indigenous community broadcasters – especially the regional network hubs and the city and the more developed remote stations – also take advantage of the internet and other communications technologies. 4K1G in Townsville and CAAMA in Alice Springs stream their programming via the internet and are reaching a vast audience. Many communities are and many others want to access new technologies.

Indeed, as a group, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people involved in the various forms of communications media (not just community broadcasting) have, for several decades, been developing their version of a national network of Indigenous media which still maintains the benefits of local community control of content, style, etc. while enabling the individual stations to be linked regionally and nationally.

This vision is developed in documents such as the former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission's (ATSIC's) Broadcasting Policy and its subsequent publications, such as *Digital Dreaming*, and *A National Indigenous Broadcasting Service: Broadcasting for Community Development*.

The latter publication – an ATSIC-commissioned feasibility study – was further developed by the later Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Services (ATSIS), in collaboration with DCITA and in consultation with an Advisory Committee

comprising Indigenous media representatives. Early in this development process, the title was amended by replacing *Broadcasting* with *Communications*, to better reflect the vision and take account of the converging technologies.

An attempt to outline our vision will be made under later terms of reference.

### ***Content and programming requirements that reflect the character of Australia and its cultural diversity***

Indigenous community broadcasting enables Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to have access to culturally appropriate and regionally relevant broadcasting services in the same way the broader Australian public does. It also takes Indigenous voices, stories, music, viewpoints and information into communities throughout Australia. This sometimes includes non-Indigenous audiences.

They also produce and broadcast programs promoting Indigenous languages, thus improving Indigenous Australians knowledge of, and access to, essential services, such as housing, health, education and legal services.

By contributing to the maintenance and promotion of Indigenous cultures, community broadcasting also contributes significantly to the stock of programs that reflect the unique character of Australia and its cultural diversity. AICA contends that it is the Indigenous cultures that provide the building blocks of what is unique to Australian culture and that, accordingly, Indigenous broadcasting (and other media) should be better nurtured. Not to do so, risks further reducing our cultural diversity and this have not only deleterious social but also negative economic implications.

Our vision of a national Indigenous communications service, linking all our community and other broadcasting services (and other communications media) while maintaining and supporting locally controlled community and regional stations would not only strengthen the maintenance, development and promotion of Indigenous cultures, but improve access to them and, at the same time, enhance the social and economic development of Indigenous communities, at the same time maintaining our languages.

### ***Technological opportunities, including digital, to expand community broadcasting networks***

As mentioned above, many Indigenous broadcasters have taken advantage of technological opportunities, including digital, to develop and expand their community broadcasting networks and to facilitate access of non-Indigenous community broadcasters to Indigenous programs.

Several decades ago, The Aboriginal Program Exchange (TAPE) was established. Indigenous community broadcasters send a selection of their programs to TAPE who used to copy them onto tape cassettes now it is compact disk and distribute them to all the other Indigenous community broadcasters. Many mainstream libraries receive copies of these programs also.

### ***Opportunities and threats to achieving a diverse and robust network of community broadcasters***

AICA contends that the long-held dream of Indigenous community broadcasters to have their own national Indigenous broadcasting and communications service, which would not only link all Indigenous community broadcasters, but also involve, as appropriate, the other Indigenous communications services (including Impaja TV, filmmakers, writers, performers and so on) would provide the best means of achieving and maintaining a diverse and robust network of Indigenous broadcasters and, thus, maintaining and developing Indigenous cultures and languages.

It is a unique view in which the benefits of a national service (eg news service, one-stop-shop for government agencies and others wishing to get information to Indigenous communities, and so on) are combined with the strengths of community broadcasting (eg, local control and diversity of cultures, views and so on, including the ability to translate nationally provided information on education, health promotions etc – into local languages). We recognise that ideally, this would necessitate a different class of broadcast licence to the community broadcasting regime. The nature of the community broadcasting licence, we contend, restricts Indigenous broadcasters' opportunities to develop robust networks that also involve the other Indigenous communications groups, such as TV, Bangarra Dance Theatre and so on. It also restricts their opportunities to gain access to sources of income other than Government. (Details of that proposal and the arguments for it should be on DCITA's files.)

AICA's proposal that Indigenous community broadcasting facilities in remote communities also be enhanced into *communications* centres that would provide telephone and internet services has other advantages, not only for community development, but also as a potential solution to some of the problems faced by Government in providing such services to remote Australia. For example, Indigenous people involved in community broadcasting in regional and/or remote communities could be trained and employed to provide those enhanced services to their communities and regions (something which Telstra seems to have difficulty in doing). Thus, not only do the communities have development and employment opportunities, the Government has a solution to one of its apparently intractable problems.

In doing this AICA and Indigenous broadcasters maintain strong links with other community broadcasting sectors.

AICA is concerned that funding agencies will not appreciate the fundamental differentiation between mainstream community broadcasters, which are volunteer based and Indigenous broadcasters which seek to maximise employment and training opportunities for the most economically disadvantaged sector in Australian society. The Indigenous peoples are the First Australians and they must play an important role in shaping and defining Australia's cultural identity in contemporary times. Indigenous broadcasting is a wonderful tool to achieve this objective.

AICA is concerned that funding agencies will take an economic rationalist viewpoint of Indigenous broadcasting and attempt to change Indigenous broadcasting to a volunteer based system, without due consideration of the adverse economic, social and cultural impacts it will have.

AICA strongly recommends that the Inquiry recognise the importance of the Indigenous broadcasting sector, support the continued development of it and the retention of all existing Indigenous broadcasting funding. Furthermore, AICA believes that the Government should quarantine an amount of this funding for Indigenous information and public awareness campaigns in the range of 3% of total funding, and ensure that these funds are primarily directed to Indigenous production houses, media organisations and radio stations.

A strong Indigenous broadcasting, television and production industry will be a significant contributor to the ongoing success of the community broadcasting industry in Australia.

AICA would welcome an opportunity to expand on these ideas at hearings of the Committee's Inquiry.