

Submission 107

VISION AUSTRALIA

**SUBMISSION TO
PARLIAMENTARY STANDING COMMITTEE ON
COMMUNICATIONS, INFORMATION,
TECHNOLOGY AND THE ARTS**

**INQUIRY INTO COMMUNITY BROADCASTING
IN AUSTRALIA**

MARCH 2006

C O N T E N T S

	Page
Executive Summary	3
Recommendations	3
Background	4
Terms of Reference	7
Recommendations	10

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Vision Australia was formed in 2004 as a result of the merger of the Royal Victorian institute for the Blind, Vision Australia Foundation, Royal Blind Society of NSW and the National Information and Library Service.

Vision Australia is a living partnership between people who are blind, vision impaired or sighted, united by the vision that in the future people with blindness or vision impairment in Australia will access and fully participate in every part of life they choose.

A consequence of sight loss is lack of direct access to print. Mindful of the information needs of the estimated 17 % of the population of people with a print disability, Vision Australia offers a number of pathways including a radio service. Vision Australia RPH presents readings from newspapers, magazines, books and other specialized information of particular relevance to various listener groups.

The network of eight stations across Victoria and Southern New South Wales involves over 800 volunteers with an annual operational cost of around \$500,000.

We take this opportunity to appraise the Committee of the contribution of Vision Australia RPH to the Australian community and to outline the delivery framework. In the context of the current technological and regulatory environment we identify opportunities for development and a number of recommendations for action by the Commonwealth Government to facilitate the strengthening of RPH as a key participant in Australian broadcasting.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Commonwealth Government amend the Copyright Act provision in Section 47 A of a statutory licence for RPH licensees to be extended to encompass delivery over the Internet and on general community licensed stations by accredited RPH program makers.
2. The Commonwealth Government will assure RPH licensees that they will not be financially disadvantaged as a result of migration to digital broadcasting and that it will facilitate introduction of Digital Broadcasting of RPH to the maximum advantage of listeners.
3. The Commonwealth Government will use its influence to ensure that people, unable to adequately see the content displayed on digital receiver screens, are provided with alternative ways of accessing this information.

BACKGROUND

Vision Australia was formed in 2004 when the Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind, Vision Australia Foundation, the Royal Blind Society of NSW and the National Information and Library Service merged.

Our Vision is:

Vision Australia is a living partnership between people who are blind, vision impaired or sighted. We are united by our vision that in the future people with blindness or vision impairment in Australia will access and fully participate in every part of life they choose.

Our Mission is:

To create a community partnership of knowledge, skills and expertise to enrich the participation in life for people who are blind or vision impaired and their families. We will ensure that the community recognises their capabilities and contributions.

Pillars that Support our Culture are:

- Information
- Problem solving
- Training
- Access

We are proud of our 400-year collective history and the role we have played in some of the country's greatest achievements for people who are blind or vision impaired including:

- Voting rights for blind people in 1902
- World first Government funded postage for Braille
- Pioneering the nation's first schools for children who are vision impaired
- Vocational training for people who are vision impaired.

Vision Australia is determined to continue striving for equity for people who are blind or vision impaired, equipping them with the skills needed to live fulfilled and independent lives. We do this by providing critical services so people can achieve greater levels of self-sufficiency and confidence. We also do this by working in partnership with the community, corporates, Trusts and Foundations and Government.

Vision Australia assists more than 38,000 people who have a vision impairment that cannot be corrected by glasses.

We strive to assist all Australians who are blind or vision impaired irrespective of their socio-economic status. The vast majority of clients who use our information services have an income below \$20,000 pa.

Our clients include newborn babies, toddlers, school children, university students, the unemployed, people at work, retirees, the elderly. Many of our clients also have additional disabilities.

Our services are offered throughout Victoria, NSW and the ACT in 37 national centres, in client's homes and in community places.

We are committed to developing skills within local communities to provide adequate support networks for people who are blind or vision impaired.

We work collaboratively with a wide range of groups and organisations, including agencies involved in child health, government specialist centres and other disability bodies.

We advocate on local, State and Federal levels to promote and instigate change on issues that affect the lives of people who are blind or vision impaired. Our recent advocacy achievements include:

- A submission to the Attorney General and House of Representative's Select Committee on Circumvention Devices to address major copyright issues.
- A driving role in the successful campaign for independent voting for people in Victoria who are blind or vision impaired.
- Achieving the right for people who are blind or vision impaired to sit on juries.
- The introduction of an ID card for people without a driver's licence.

Our services include integrated programs for:

- Information and library
- Low vision assistance
- Independent living
- Children
- Employment
- Equipment
- Technology
- People who are deafblind
- Leisure/recreation

Vision Australia currently has 694 full-time equivalent staff across 37 centres comprising:

- 500 full-time staff
- 285 part-time staff
- 189 casual staff

More than 6,000 volunteers freely give their time and skills each year to help us provide our essential services.

A significant consequence of vision loss is lack of access to print. In addition, a physical disability inhibiting handling of the printed page, as well as learning or language difficulty means that in the order of 17 % of Australians are unable to adequately read print. A consequence of lack of access to print is a severe reduction in opportunity to access information vital for adequate participation in life's activities. Over 95 % of the world's printed content is not alternatively available for people with a print disability.

Vision Australia confronts this national problem by offering a range of pathways to printed content. These pathways each address the various, often conflicting, elements of quality service such as availability, timeliness and ease of access.

The Vision Australia Information Library serves around 16,000 borrowers with talking books, telephone and online content.

Vision Australia RPH is a network of eight Community Licensed radio stations addressing the information needs of people with a print disability.

We participate actively as a member of RPH Australia, which brings together the country's fifteen RPH stations. We support RPH Australia with its endeavours for further development of RPH. In particular we endorse its efforts to:

- Extend services to more Australian regional centres;
- Find new platforms for delivery such as Internet and Digital Television;
- Reform copyright law to facilitate more flexible delivery methods for RPH content;
- Increase funding opportunities for RPH providers.

We welcome this opportunity to present a submission to the Committee's enquiry in to Community Broadcasting In Australia.

Noting the intention of the enquiry to find "ways to support a vibrant and diverse network of community broadcasters", we will address each of the terms of reference. It is our intention to present information about the current state of Vision Australia RPH and to identify needs, particularly those which can be alleviated through the intervention and assistance of the Commonwealth Government.

TERMS OF REFERENCE

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

Of the fifteen licensed RPH (Radio for the Print Handicapped), stations across Australia, eight comprise the network operated by Vision Australia. Our stations operate throughout Victoria and Southern NSW, in the following locations:

Melbourne	1179 AM
Mildura	107.5 FM
Albury	101.7 FM
Shepparton	100.1 FM
Bendigo	88.7 FM
Geelong	99.5 FM
Warragul	93.5 FM
Warrnambool	94.5 FM

The community of interest for our radio service are people with a print disability. That is those people who for reasons such as vision loss, a physical disability inhibiting handling of the printed page or because a learning or language difficulty are unable to adequately access print. It is estimated that in the order of 17 % of the population have a print disability. (Market Equity Research in 2003.)

Many others tune to RPH because it is convenient and its readings and other specialised information content are of interest. McNaire Ingenuity research in 2005 concluded that RPH Melbourne is heard by around 135,000 people each week. From this we conservatively deduce a network weekly listenership in excess of 150,000.

Vision Australia RPH is resourced by 800 volunteers comprising 450 for the Melbourne operation and around 50 at each of the seven regional stations. A staff team of five, and others from the organisation, provide infrastructure support in areas such as volunteer coordination, marketing and finance and administration.

The annual operating cost of Vision Australia RPH is around \$500,000.

Revenue sources are in the order of:

Program sponsorship	40 %;
Individual and other donations	35 %;
Commonwealth Government	20 %;
Other Vision Australia sources	5 %.

Major spending areas include:

- Salaries
- Communications links
- Transmitter maintenance, operation and site rental
- Subscriptions to newspapers and other publications
- Printing.

Though RPH content is delivered via analogue radio, we are mindful that the need of the 'community' of interest' will be better served through such delivery pathways as the internet and digital radio. We look to the Commonwealth Government to help us overcome barriers to full utilisation of the digital technologies. These barriers include current copyright provisions, uncertainty about spectrum availability for digital transmission, and the need for funding to achieve transition to digital transmission.

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

RPH programming comprises:

- Readings from newspapers and other printed publications
- Information from Government, disability and other community organisations of special relevance to various listener groups and not available through alternative electronic media;
- Other content of special interest to listener groups, such as audio description of events otherwise only available on television, including Wimbledon Tennis and Vision Australia Carols By Candlelight.

Our role is to convey to our audience the content of the print media. We endeavour to communicate the character of Australia and cultural diversity as portrayed in newspapers, magazines, and other printed content to which other people have direct access.

Most programs emanate from our Melbourne studios, located at our Vision Australia centre in Kooyong.

During the first part of the day there is concentration on in-depth readings of the news items of the day's newspapers. In the afternoon there is more attention given to feature items from newspapers and magazines. The evening programs give attention to comment and opinion from the papers as well as extensive book readings. Throughout the day and evening there are special interest information programs from Government, disability and other community organisations.

For up to three hours each day the regional stations break away from the network to broadcast local content. This includes extensive reading from the local publication such as *The Border Mail* through Albury RPH or *Sunraysia Daily* in Mildura. Attention is also given to local community information through reading and interviews with key individuals. During week day afternoons listeners in Melbourne can hear extensive readings from the suburban publications.

For seven hours overnight, the RPH network carries a relay of BBC World Service.

Technological opportunities, including digital, to expand community broadcasting networks

The quality and reach of RPH can benefit significantly from technological advances.

Studio Environment

We are currently transitioning from an analogue studio environment to digital operation. This will provide a number of benefits including:

- Consistent and high quality studio audio;
- Less demands on volunteer operators;
- Automated operation at times of non live programming.

Conversion of the full network is scheduled for completion by the end of 2006.

The Internet

Utilisation of the Internet for RPH delivery can:

- Enable listeners to access live content where AM radio is not accessible;
- Enable listeners to access content as audio on demand providing more timely and convenient access and increasing the opportunity for maximum use to be made of the content;
- Showcase this specialized broadcasting format to the world.

The primary barrier to utilisation of the Internet for RPH delivery is the current copyright provisions which do not automatically allow flow on of arrangements currently available to RPH broadcasters.

Digital Radio Broadcasting

Digital transmission of RPH content will afford listeners benefits available to listeners of other Australian broadcast services. We did participate in the DRB Melbourne trials in 2004 and are keen to participate in the planning and implementation of DRB in Australia.

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

The new technology environment opens unparalleled opportunities for development of RPH.

- Digital production and automated operation will enhance the audio quality and presentation of programs.
- Internet delivery can better meet the needs of those with restricted access to radio reception or who can benefit from the more flexible availability of audio.
- Digital television offers a platform accessible to listeners outside licensed coverage areas.
- DRB will bring to RPH listeners benefits that will be available to other listeners of Australian broadcast services.

We are mindful of the threats to full exploitation of these opportunities.

Copyright

RPH licensed broadcasters benefit from a statutory licence provided for in Section 47A of the Copyright Act. This licence enables RPH stations to broadcast readings of any printed content, providing procedures such as keeping a record of all items broadcast are followed.

Currently this provision does not apply to RPH programming on general community radio stations or to RPH content delivered via the Internet. In recent times there have been discussions with the Department of Communications, Information, Technology and the Arts and the Attorney General's Department on these matters

and we look forward to a revision of the Act which will enable more effective utilization of these recently presenting opportunities.

Digital Radio Planning

With the shift in broadcasting to digital transmission, we are mindful of the need to plan for adequate accommodation of RPH. RPH providers will be disadvantaged if they do not have at least equivalent spectrum and coverage to that currently enjoyed. With the eventual momentum shift of broadcasters to digital transmission, it will be imperative that all broadcasters migrate to ensure viability. Vision Australia seeks from the Commonwealth Government an assurance that it will not be financially disadvantaged as a result of migration to digital broadcasting.

We wish to draw to attention a broader access issue in relation to digital radio. One of the well publicised benefits of DRB is the capacity for broadcasters to display on the receiver screen text information such as music track details. We would like the Commonwealth Government to use its influence to ensure that people unable to adequately see the screen contents are provided with alternative ways of accessing this information.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are submitted with the objective of obtaining Commonwealth Government assistance with positioning RPH to strengthen its place as an essential participant in Australian broadcasting.

1. That the Commonwealth Government amend the Copyright Act provision in Section 47 A of a statutory licence for RPH licensees to be extended to encompass delivery over the Internet and on general community licensed stations by accredited RPH program makers.
2. The Commonwealth Government will assure RPH licensees that they will not be financially disadvantaged as a result of migration to digital broadcasting and that it will facilitate introduction of Digital Broadcasting of RPH to the maximum advantage of listeners.
3. The Commonwealth Government will use its influence to ensure that people, unable to adequately see the content displayed on digital receiver screens, are provided with alternative ways of accessing this information.