

Submission to the House of Representatives
Standing Committee on Communications,
Information Technology and the Arts inquiry into

Submission 66

Community Broadcasting

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Department of
Industry and Resources

Introduction

Because of the geography and demography of the State, the Government of Western Australia has had a long interest in Community Broadcasting. This has been promoted in numerous submissions to Commonwealth inquiries and in practical activities.

A prime indication of the State Government's interest was the encouragement of the consortium that founded Access 31 – the nation's most successful community telecaster. Access 31's position has been enhanced by State Government and Lotteries WA grants to the station and to radio stations in the community sector to enable them to provide much needed services.

In 2005, the Western Australian Department of Culture and the Arts managed a Community and Ethnic Media Grants Program which provided support for innovative programming and/or special capital costs. Through this fund, community, Indigenous and ethnic media outlets throughout Western Australia received a boost of more than \$1million in grants.

The Western Australian Government continues to retransmit Access 31 through its Westlink satellite service, so it is available terrestrially in Albany and Bunbury. Westlink also makes available the 6RPH Radio for the Print Handicapped service on its satellite channel, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. This not only serves print handicapped persons directly, but also can provide material for community stations across the country.

Community broadcasting is important to Western Australia because it provides an avenue for localism, allowing neighbourhood, suburban and small town issues and voices to be heard.

This sector provides Western Australians with training and experience for performers, artists and technicians. Not incidentally, it presents opportunities for small businesses to advertise their goods and services to sharply-focused local audiences.

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

As technologies converge, so does community broadcasting as evidenced by the discussions at the Community Broadcasting Association of Australia (CBAA)'s national conference in Fremantle in November 2005. Community radio services have begun podcasting, streaming programs and making both radio and television services available via the internet.

The Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) lists 39 permanent community radio licence holders and three aspirants in Western Australia. Eighteen of these licences are held by Indigenous communities with twelve using transmitters designed to retransmit ABC programs as part of the former Broadcasting to Remote Aboriginal Communities Service (BRACS). Another licensee is located on Christmas Island. The community radio stations in Esperance and Geraldton have a religious focus. Access 31 is the lone broadcast television licensee, with Goolarri TV in Broome as a narrowcast licensee.

In Western Australia Indigenous news, information and culture is transmitted through Goolarri Media on an open narrowcast television channel in Broome and a radio service which is circulated from Broome to other indigenous communities and rebroadcast on BRACS transmitters throughout the Pilbara, Kimberley and Western Desert. This provides a vital service to many very isolated communities.

Perth's 6EBA-FM is Perth's only fulltime multilingual community radio station. It broadcasts in more than 73 languages to Perth's diverse ethnic community.

Stations in York and Albany capture the regional lifestyle and Harvey's Main Street radio brings an agricultural community of 2500 to thousands of listeners along a 400 hundred kilometre trail, as the only community voice between Perth and Albany.

Meekatharra's Radio Meeka gives high school students an opportunity to learn about the media and community in a shire of 2100 residents 760 km north of the State capital.

Valuable spectrum space in Perth is being shared by a sports-centred station on weekends and a seniors' oriented station during the week.

Several stations such as Perth's RTR-FM and Curtin-FM, as well as Twin Cities FM in the northern suburbs of Perth, stream their programming on the internet, claiming listeners around the world. Websites are important to stations seeking to expand and improve their reach.

The Western Australian Government's Westlink satellite television service, licensed as a narrowcaster, broadcasts programs for education, training, and corporate development as well as special events and conferences across the State and nation. Westlink's education and training programs were core features of Access 31's original program schedule. Now Westlink makes Access 31 available on weekends to retransmission facilities in Albany and Bunbury as well as Westlink's own satellite viewers in remote areas.

Community broadcasting remains the best organised way for minorities and communities to gain a place in mainstream broadcast media, which looks likely to remain as the backbone of mass communications. These diverse voices need to be kept alive.

For community broadcasting to maintain and enhance its role in converging media, it needs support from the Commonwealth in accessing technologies and maintaining position on the spectrum.

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

Community broadcasting is important because it provides outlets for transmitting ideas, voices and images as a mass medium. This is why in a State as large, diverse and lonely as Western Australia the State Government has actively encouraged it.

Of the State's 1.9 million people, 1.4 million (74%) live in the Perth Metropolitan Area. Another 194,000 persons live in the South West, concentrating 84% of the State's population in the South West quadrant.

After the 13% of the population described in the 2001 census as being born in "North West Europe" (assumed to be the United Kingdom and Ireland), the largest groups of Western Australians born overseas are those from Southern and Eastern Europe and from South-East Asia. Each group is listed in the census as having 3.3% of the population. Certain regional towns have attracted large numbers of migrants: notably the mining towns of the Pilbara and the Goldfields. Carnarvon's groves attracted many Southern Europeans. Italian names are heard frequently in Wheatbelt towns such as Southern Cross. Pearlers from North Asia settled in Broome early in the last century. Community broadcasting provides these ethnic groups with a voice and a chance to maintain links with their language and culture.

A mining company established a community radio station, 6NEW, in Newman, 1184 kilometres north of Perth, for the benefit of its workforce. This is an excellent example of a corporate response to meeting the needs of an isolated community. Ongoing funding, however, remains a problem.

The localism that community broadcasters provide cannot be duplicated. Community broadcasters must survive as an alternative to commercial and national broadcasters. With nationalisation of services, community broadcasting provides the only true local voice.

Community broadcasters bring to audiences programming that is overlooked by the commercials and the nationals. For example, Access 31 captured the rights to the Ashes Test Cricket in 2001 when the commercial rights holder found the timing inconvenient for Perth audiences. Over 200,000 West Australians watched the

coverage which featured the then Premier Geoff Gallop as a guest analyst.

Regulations which enable pay telecasters to gain exclusive rights to sporting events should be examined, along with regulations to overcome the hoarding of these events by free-to-air telecasters. All free-to-air telecasters, especially community stations, should have an opportunity to air major sports programming before they are made available to Pay TV.

Community television provides Western Australian filmmakers with an important avenue, and one that is increasingly being utilized, to showcase Western Australian films to a Western Australian audience. Currently an eight week season of documentaries is being screened on Access 31 showcasing the diverse range of work of West Australian filmmakers. The State has long seen documentary as a flagship genre for Western Australia. The station in cooperation with ScreenWest (Western Australia's film funding and development agency) and Lotteries West are supporting this effort.

Community radio is also a critical pathway for Western Australian contemporary music practitioners to reach an audience and promote their work. For example, the Department of Culture and the Arts has entered into an important partnership with Perth's RTR FM in acknowledgement of the importance of community broadcasting in the development of the contemporary music sector.

Technological opportunities, including digital, to expand community broadcasting networks

It is vital that this sector is afforded technological opportunities, especially those brought about by digitisation of radio and television services.

- *It must be confirmed that community television has access to a digital channel*

Allocation of a full bandwidth segment is crucial in order for digitised community television services to achieve its potential. 7MHz channels should be made available for a full-time community/educational television service nationwide. The experience of Access 31 in Perth shows that with full-time, full-spectrum access and a wide array of content providers, including educational and training material and government services, a successful alternative programming source can exist.

- *Multichannelling must be available for community broadcasters*

Community broadcasters, like other digitised television and radio stations, should be allowed to put different program streams or enhancements to air at the same time on a digital channel. Multichannelling can expand the potential of a community television service by catering to a range of specialised needs. Within defined limits, community broadcasting multichannels could be used for revenue-raising purposes.

- *Community radio services must be assigned multiplex transmission facilities with potential for full channels*

Community broadcasters should be granted use of multiplexing services, preferably with national broadcasters and telecasters. This is the only way that community broadcasters can attain a degree of equity with other free-to-air services and become an established part of the digitised broadcast environment. A full bandwidth allocation should be considered.

- *Terrestrial community television services must be carried, along with all other free-to-air services, on subscription television services*

Again, in order to survive, community broadcasters must be available to the largest audiences possible. As subscription services are digitising faster than free-to-air and viewers seek better reception through cable, Pay TV's take-up rate grows. Former free-to-air viewers are losing their local community station's signal. Subscription telecasters must be required to provide the complete array of all free-to-air services available in the geographic area covered.

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

Opportunities

Localism – diversity

Multichannelling on the digital spectrum can increase localism and the diversity of a community broadcaster. A program can be enhanced with language versions or localised references. Specific interests can be catered for at the same time: local news can be further localised by presenting the local news at a single time slot with multichannels devoted to different geographic areas. A 6:30pm local newscast could be multichanneled for northern, southern, eastern and western suburbs. A football show could be multichannelled for Aussie Rules, Rugby Union, Rugby League, Soccer and Gridiron.

New technologies and personalised delivery through new devices

Much as the use of multichannelling expands diversity, placing programming on the internet and making it available on I-pod-like devices and mobile phones will expand audiences while also allowing for more specialised and targeted services.

Training

Bright-eyed university and TAFE graduates looking for experience turn to community broadcasting which remains the major training ground for the national and commercial broadcast media. With many key technologies to master, community broadcasters play a role in this area, and are deserving of support.

Sponsorship and Advertising

With the confluence of statewide and national broadcast media, sponsors and advertisers have a greater chance to get their messages across to a more targeted audience by using community broadcasting services.

Threats

Cost of conversion

The costs for the conversion to digital are not within the reach of community broadcasters. There is a need for equipment and infrastructure upgrades and purchases, as well as accompanying user training and access to expert advice.

Spectrum

Commercial interests and other users threaten to take over spectrum leaving no room or no acceptable room for community broadcasting. Even the national broadcasters/telecasters pose a threat to spectrum space.

Reception

Poor reception is still a threat to community telecasters. Community television and radio stations were not included in Commonwealth Black Spot funding. In Perth, this means that viewers in outer suburbs who receive the local commercial and national service via repeaters are unable to receive the sixth channel. The Black Spot Fund should be renewed for such situations. The must-carry provision for subscription telecasters may also alleviate some of the problems.

Filling the Gaps

Examples like that of the Newman mining company are rare, especially with the emergence of fly-in/fly-out workforces to operate resource facilities. Mining camps now have dormitories with all the latest converged technologies as attractions for workers.

Unfortunately, the absence of community broadcasters is not confined to small communities. Five of the State's largest towns - Bunbury, Geraldton, Busselton, Broome and Kalgoorlie - have no general interest community radio stations.

Options

Funding

Capital funding to enable for conversion for digitisation is essential. To maintain community broadcasting's place on the

listeners' and viewers' crowded personal spectrum, funding should also be targeted towards the development of new programs such as community news, information, arts achievements and events, to be broadcast via television, radio, internet , portable or mobile devices.

Considering the role community broadcasters play in the development of on- and off-air talent, training support should also be considered.

Monies can be sourced in a number of ways. Among them are advertising, sliding scale licence fees, community broadcasting obligations on the part of commercial telecasters or transmitter owners, and grants through the Community Broadcasting Fund.

Commonwealth funding does not simply have to be provided as grants. The Commonwealth spends millions of dollars on advertising on commercial and SBS radio and television, but little ad money comes the way of community television – which has proven to have significant audiences. Commonwealth advertising also opens up valuable opportunities to reach specific audiences as has been done for Radio for the Print Handicapped and Indigenous stations.

Historically, community broadcasters have been unable to attract advertising revenue from Government or private sector. A significant reason is because community broadcasters do not regularly subscribe to research data providers such as Morgan or Oztam, thus their figures are not included in their surveys. Without that kind of scientifically accumulated data, advertisers will not expend funds in the community sector. Unfortunately, for the small community broadcaster, subscribing to this data is very expensive. Building on the work that has already been done in this field, community broadcasters need help to acquire this data regularly (thus being included in the statistics) either through joint or extended licences with the researchers or through direct subsidies from the Commonwealth.

Expertise

In addition to money, community broadcasters require access to expertise on such areas as new technologies, conversion and legal issues. The Community Broadcasting Foundation (CBF) could manage a talent and skills bank that would be able to provide expertise and advice. This would complement the resources already available through the CBF and the CBAA.

CONSULTATIONS

The following organisations have been consulted in the preparation of this submission:

Access 31 Perth

Community Broadcasting Association of Australia

Department of Culture and the Arts, Western Australia

Government Media Office, Department of the Premier and Cabinet, Western Australia

Radio for the Print Handicapped Australia

Westlink, Department of Local Government and Regional Development, Western Australia

Western Australian Community Broadcasting Association

RESOURCES

Relevant documentation on issues raised in this submission. Copies available upon request.

1. **Submission to the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts review of the Duration of the Analogue/Digital Television Simulcast Period**
Department of Industry and Resources, November 2005
2. **Submission to Review of Broadcasting Services Bands Spectrum**
Department of Industry and Resources, December 2004
3. **Provision of Services Other than Simulcasting – Response to DCITA Review**
Department of Industry and Resources, July 2004
4. ***Telecommunications Needs Assessment: the communications needs of regional Western Australians***
Department of Industry and Resources, July 2003
5. **Response to DCITA Proposal for Community Broadcasting Arrangements**
Department of Industry and Technology, September 2002
6. **Digital Transmission of Community Television: Response to DCITA review**
Department of Industry and Technology, July 2001

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