



To the Committee Secretary
Standing Committee on Communications, Information
Technology and the Arts
House of Representatives
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Australia

**Submission to the House of Representatives
Standing Committee on Communications,
Information Technology and the Arts
Community Broadcasting Inquiry**

from

**Melbourne Community Television Consortium
(MCTC),
C31 Melbourne and Geelong**

Section 1 – Introduction

1.1 Introductory Remarks

We are grateful for the opportunity to discuss several of the issues faced by C31 in Melbourne that fall within the terms of reference of this inquiry.

C31 is a community television broadcaster that transmits to the area of Greater Melbourne and Geelong, providing local communities and community groups with access to airspace and training programs. C31 a vehicle for under represented community groups to share their voice with their own communities and the general public. Our aim at C31 is to provide Melbournians with a station that provides access, promotes diversity, engages with a local audience and provides high quality programming.

This submission is intended to be read as an adjunct to the CBAA general and television submissions to the current inquiry. C31 Melbourne and Geelong participated in, and fully endorses the CBAA submissions to the current inquiry.

C31 Melbourne and Geelong is also represented on the 'Community Spectrum Taskforce', and participated in and endorses the CST submission as the first step towards expanded civil use of BSB spectrum in addition to the current community broadcasting licensees.

1.2 Summary

Section 2 of this submission looks at the role of MCTC in Melbourne, and reviews C31's current broadcast range and limitations.

Section 3 of this submission reviews the strengths of C31's programming, including:

- The station's involvement with catering to the needs and diversity of local regional, ethnic and special interest communities.
- Its high level of voluntary participation,
- The level of ongoing program contribution by community groups that receive little or no funding,
- The growing popularity of the station and high viewer-ship of many of the programs,
- The variety and quality of the programs featured on C31.
- The value of C31 as a training ground.

This section also discusses MCTC's assistance with skill development, confidence building and its provision of training for the next generation of television Producers, Directors, Presenters and a myriad of other media-related roles.

Section 4 of this submission discusses the foreseeable problems that C31 in Melbourne will face in the next few years without access to digital spectrum.

It also discusses the lack of availability of C31 within the pay TV platform.

Given the current lack of funding devoted to community television by the Federal Government, MCTC urges the committee to recommend public funding for digital transmission until the analogue switch-off.

Section 5 is an Executive Summary including recommendations.

Section 2-

The scope and role of C31 Melbourne

This section discusses the current broadcast range of C31 and the role of MCTC in Melbourne's media landscape.

2.1 The Technology used to broadcast C31 Melbourne, and its current program schedule

MCTC has been broadcasting C31 programming to the Greater Area of Melbourne and Geelong via an analogue frequency since it was granted a temporary broadcasting license in October 1994. Originally, the station only broadcast for 5.5 hours a day (from 6 – 11:30pm).

Over the years, the hours of broadcast have increased, due to the station's growing viewer-ship, an increased interest in minority groups having a voice in the community, and the granting of a fulltime license in July 2004.

Since August 9, 2004, C31 Melbourne has been providing programming for 147 hours a week, to Melbournians.

In that year, the station introduced a digital Playbox system that converts program and sponsorship tapes into mpeg2 digital files. These files are stored onto a central server for scheduling. Once they are coordinated into play-lists they are ready for automated broadcast, and do not require a human operator.

C31 Melbourne was the first Community Television station to implement this innovative and low-cost Playbox system. This system has allowed the hours of C31 Melbourne's broadcast to increase beyond midnight, and has freed Staff and Volunteer time to concentrate upon developing their creative and production skills. Since that time, C31 has been broadcasting from 6:00am – 3:30am. This system has allowed the station to provide more locally relevant footage and programming for Melbourne and Geelong's night-shift workers and late night viewers.

2.2 The Role of MCTC Melbourne

MCTC actively complies with the CBAA's Code of Practice and its programming is structured to follow their guiding principles¹:

- To promote harmony and diversity in contributing to a cohesive, inclusive and culturally diverse Australian community;
- Pursue the principles of democracy, access and equity, especially to people and issues under-represented in other media;
- Enhance the diversity of programming choices available to the public and present programs which expand the variety of viewpoints broadcast in Australia;
- Demonstrate independence in their programming as well as in their editorial and management decisions;
- Support and develop local and Australian arts, music and culture in the station's programming, to reflect a sense of Australian identity, character and cultural diversity;
- Widen the community's involvement in broadcasting.
- Demonstrate a commitment to participate in the development of the community-broadcasting sector at a state and national level in order to support continuous improvement across all community television service providers.

The methodology by which these guiding principles are followed is clearly outlined in section 3 of this submission.

¹ <http://www.cbaa.org.au/content.php/345.html>

Section 3- An outline of MCTC's programming and its strengths

3.1 Creating harmony and catering to the needs of our diverse community

C31 Melbourne boasts a broad range of programming that allows under-represented community groups to have a voice. As an alternative to radio, the medium of television allows communities to present the Melbourne public with audio-visual footage neglected by the mainstream media. C31 Melbourne also enables our voluntary program providers an opportunity to familiarise their audiences with a range of views, cultures, programming formats and presenting styles.

“Without C31 we couldn't have put this message out. We would have been sitting at home spewing about the unfair portrayal of our community”.
(Ahmed Hassan, Producer of 'Salam Café').

Salam Café – a panel program hosted by a team of young Australian Muslims – is amongst the station's multi-award winning culturally and linguistically diverse programs on C31 Melbourne.

The station prides itself on offering at least 20 hours of airtime per week to ethnically diverse programming. **Broadcasting in 22 languages**, C31 has secured the loyal viewing of many of Melbourne's migrant population. Sundays from 8am – 11pm have been devoted to programming structured around an ethnic focus. Oztam figures from February 2006² show that this day of the week alone attracts an audience of **nearly half a million people**. Each of these programs (broadcast in 17 languages), attract a unique and culturally specific audience.

As well as our range of ethnically diverse programming, there are many other minority groups, local regional and specific interest communities that enjoy representation on C31 Melbourne, including:

- Melbourne's deaf community, with 'Deaf TV' broadcast in Auslan, (the only program made in Australia by the Deaf community for the Deaf Community)
- Youth community contributors of a number of programs, including 'Syn TV'
- the Geelong community's bi-weekly local news program, 'Geelong Newsbeat'
- Local regional programming, i.e. Northern Access Television's: 'Nat Chat', profiling local personalities and issues
- amateur football leagues (Soccer and Aussie Rules) – that have access to 5 hours a week of C31 airtime

² <http://www.channel31.org.au/producers/documents/ViewingFigures-C31-2006-02.pdf>

- G.L.B.T.I. programming, such as 'Bent TV'
- Senior Citizen's Programs, represented by such programs as 'Move It or Lose It'.
- Independent programmers, covering second-tier sports, such as hockey and motocross, as well as fishing and 4wd.

'No Limits' is an exemplary program, broadcast on C31 Melbourne that showcases the capabilities of Melbourne's disabled community, whilst raising awareness of the issues that many of this disadvantaged group regularly face. Highly accoladed, No Limits was the **winner** of both the CBAA and The Antennas' '**Program of the Year**', awards in 2005.

3.2 Voluntary Participation

For the last few years, C31 Melbourne has boasted an average of 1000 volunteers at any given time. The roles of these volunteers are wide and various, from directors, publicists and producers to researchers, camera operators and on-air talent.

By paying a small yearly fee (that equates to \$1 a day), C31 Melbourne offers not for profit community groups an opportunity to become members of the station, allowing them, amongst other benefits, access to free airtime.

MCTC is run by a board of active voluntary members that meet every month. This board consists of voluntary administrative personnel and representatives from the station's full member groups.

Four times a year, MCTC holds a general assembly to discuss the stations role and make policy decisions. This assembly is open to all of MCTC's members, and is run democratically.

3.3 C31 Melbourne's community-affiliated groups, and their access to airtime.

MCTC currently has 40 affiliated member groups that represent a variety of communities from Melbourne and Geelong. These not for profit community groups utilize 70% of C31's airtime. Members include:

- **AATV Australian Asian Television Association**
- **Al Hadara Inc**
- **Antena Hispana: Hispanic Community Television Inc**
- **Arabic Society of Victoria Inc.**
- **Arts Community TV Inc**
- **Australian Croatian Cultural Association Inc.**
- **Australian Hungarian Magazine Association Inc.**
- **Australian Romanian Community Television Inc.**
- **Bent TV Association Inc.**
- **Deaf TV Inc**
- **Egyptian TV Group**
- **ERA TV Eastern Access Television Inc.**
- **Geelong Newsbeat Inc.**
- **Greek Community Television Inc.**
- **Indian Television Broadcasting Association Inc.**
- **ITV Italian Television.**
- **Macedonian Community TV**
- **Maltese TV Inc.**
- **Melbourne Indonesian Club Inc.**
- **MHTV Melbourne Hungarian Television Association Inc.**
- **NAT TV Northern Access Television Inc.**
- **Pinoy Filipino TV Inc.**
- **Punjabi Television Network Inc.**
- **RMITV Student Television.**
- **Russian TV Association Inc.**
- **Serbian TV Inc.**
- **Oz Shalom TV Inc**
- **Sinhala Cultural Association Inc.**
- **SKA TV Inner South Eastern Access Television.**
- **Slovenian Television Inc.**
- **Somali Community TV Inc.**
- **Songlines Corporation Inc.**
- **Southern Television Inc.**
- **Sputnik- Russian Cultural and Television Association Inc.**
- **Swin TV Swinburne Television Association Inc.**
- **SYN Inc.**
- **Turkish TV - Bizce Boyle Inc.**
- **Vietnamese TV Inc.**
- **Yarra Access - Yarra Access Inner-City Television**

3.4 The growing popularity of the station and high viewer-ship of many of the programs

Despite the uptake of digital transmitting creating a decrease in viewer numbers, C31 Melbourne is **proud** to have **1.3 million viewers** tuning in every month³. (Refer Appendix 2, “Impact of Digital Uptake on C31 Melbourne”, Figs. 1 and 2)

With 21 of its programs receiving **over 50,000 viewers** per week, according to Oztam's February ratings, C31's diverse programming maintains a loyal viewer base.

Some of the highest rating programs on C31 Melbourne include:

- **Vasili's Garden**, a Greek gardening-lifestyle program, with **124,200 viewers every week**,
- **One World** – a documentary style program focusing upon different nationalities and cultures
- **Chartbusting 80's** – the only program on television dedicated to playing music from the 80's, complete with extroverted hosts and a live studio audience.
- **River to Reef** - a boating and fishing extravaganza, filled with tips and ideas for holidays in the Melbourne and Geelong region.

C31 Melbourne receives many feedback emails from viewers. Such as the following:

Dear Sir/Madam

I must congratulate you and Ch31 on the show “Nurse TV – Nick’s Story”.

This has been an excellent ‘eye opener’ into heart attacks and what is involved in the treatment and ‘post op’ rehabilitation of the patient.

I too was a victim of a heart attack but was fortunate not to need a by-pass op.

Whoever put this show together is to be congratulated, the doctors and nursing staff also. Maybe there is a possibility of other types of serious illness that could be viewed in the same way as “Nick’s Story”.

Once again thank you for an excellent show.

D. O’Neil (email feedback from a C31 viewer, Tuesday 14th February)

For further examples of viewer feedback, please refer to Appendix 1, ‘C31 Melbourne Content Feedback’.

³ <http://www.channel31.org.au/producers/documents/ViewingFigures-C31-2006-02.pdf>

3.5 The variety and quality of the programs featured on C31

MCTC is committed to scheduling a variety of diverse content on C31 Melbourne. The station not only deals with minority communities, it features programs that are dedicated to the arts, music, comedy, drama, reality programs and news/current affairs.

In the near future C31 will begin focusing upon Indigenous programming. The station has scheduled Nunga TV for Season 50, commencing on April 2, and has been collaborating with local Indigenous groups to get some Melbourne-based Indigenous programs off the ground and on-air. We also look forward to the potential carriage of nationally provided indigenous programming.

C31 Melbourne is dedicated to screening quality programs. In order to encourage our program providers to strive to achieve their personal best, we offer them access to advice and training courses, and are actively involved in The Antennas (Australia's National Community Television Awards)⁴. Through encouragement, advice, training and rewards for great accomplishments, C31 has created an environment that nurtures talent, new ideas, and potential.

3.6 The value of C31 as a training ground

Many people associate Rove McManus with community television, but the breadth of people trained in the sector is not widely recognized by the public. While there are a number of notable personalities on mainstream television and radio who have a background in the community sector, there are far more people behind the scenes who have also developed and honed their skills through their association with community television.

On the job training is provided by most of C31's member groups and C31, in conjunction with OPEN Channel (Victoria's screen culture organization) has developed accredited and non accredited training to volunteers of C31's member groups including ethnic, indigenous and "at risk" youth. Most notable of these was the Certificate IV in Digital Post Production which was delivered in late 2000 and won the coveted CBAA "Excellence in Training" award in 2001.

While training within the commercial and national TV broadcasters has eroded substantially over the last 18 years, the community television sector is increasingly the primary training ground for Australia's next generation of broadcasters.

We look forward to further developing our training role in consultation with the broadcasting industry.

⁴ <http://www.channel31.org.au/antennas/Antennas.html>

Section 4- Foreseeable problems for C31 Melbourne in the future, the financial impact of digital take up and the digital-analogue solution

4.1 A decrease in ratings and lack of access to C31 Melbourne with digital take-up around Australia

Commensurate with the increasing rate in which Australians are purchasing digital set top boxes nation-wide (see figure 2, appendix 2 'Digital Impact Statement'), C31 Melbourne - which currently relies upon analogue transmission for broadcast – has experienced a decline in ratings (see figure 1, appendix 2).

Not only is C31 unavailable to viewers that take a pay TV subscription, C31 does not broadcast on digital spectrum, rendering it inaccessible to most members of the public that purchase a digital receiver.

Many of our viewers have advised us that they were unaware, prior to purchasing a digital set-top box that once they converted their terrestrial televisions to digital, their access to viewing C31 Melbourne would cease, as the station does not currently have access to digital spectrum.

The 'general enquiries' email address, accessible from the C31 Melbourne website: www.c31.org.au has received many opinions about this issue, similar to the following:

I was just wondering how long it was until C31 goes digital, if at all, I have digital at home and miss C31 programming. Thanks, Matt S (Email received from a former viewer on 23 February, 2006)

For further examples of similar feedback, refer to Appendix 2 'page 7, 'Viewer Experiences'.

4.2 Financial problems that a decline in access and ratings may create for the station.

The funding model for community television is based primarily on the sale of sponsorship announcements and program air-time, with limits on each of those categories. There are also potential secondary fundraising sources such as donations and viewer subscriptions. What is clear is that all of these activities rely on there being a critical mass of viewers in order to be successful. A steady decrease in the number of viewers will ultimately impact upon the station being able to fund itself.

Currently C31 is not only meeting its operating budget, it is making a small surplus of around \$30,000 per month. This has been achieved in large by ensuring that all of the available time for sponsorship announcements (7 minutes per hour) has been sold. In order to do this, the station has implemented a break-through initiative of selling low cost packages of 15 second announcements, which has greatly assisted in counteracting potential fall-off in revenue due to diminishing viewing figures. This strategy also stimulates the small business economy by allowing affordable access to television promotion to local small and medium businesses.

The station is now at a point where logically it should be able to consolidate upon its sales success and slowly raise the spot rate, thus increasing total revenue. However, with declining viewing figures this may not be possible. If spot sales were to diminish due to falling viewer ship (which would also likely cause a corresponding fall in revenue from other fundraising activities), the only way the station could remain viable would be to reduce costs. Given that C31 is already a lean operation; the most likely way of reducing costs would be to lay off staff, with the concomitant reduction of services that that would entail.

Crucially, with the very real potential of shrinking revenue stream over the next few years, if the decision to allow community television to broadcast digitally is delayed for a substantial period, then it will be the case that the licensees will have little or no ability to contribute to the costs of upgrading to digital transmission, increasing the need for funding assistance from the Federal Government.

Section 4.3 the digital-analogue solution

There are a myriad of benefits that are driving the uptake of digital television, including the promise of improved picture quality; as C31's signal is comparatively weaker, viewers have assumed that converting to digital would improve their reception. Yet they find that when they install a digital free to air receiver they are unable to access C31, and have to convert back to their analogue reception or spend extra time and money in order to do so.

Overall, there is confusion as to why C31 Melbourne is not broadcasting digitally, whilst five other free-to-air stations are. Viewers are further confused by the appearance of a channel numbered '31' on their set top box that actually represents a part of the SBS package.

Viewers clearly want and expect C31 Melbourne to be available on a digital receiver. It is highly likely that, were the station to broadcast digitally, the number of viewers of the station would increase – due to the better reception and greater picture quality available digitally.

As it has built up a loyal following due to its promotion of local issues and diverse interests, C31 Melbourne needs to be given the opportunity to be on parity with the five other free-to-air broadcasters that currently transmit on both a digital and analogue frequency.

Moreover, it's vital that Channel 31 Melbourne is able to simulcast on analogue and digital until the analogue switch-off date. Any direct switch from analogue to digital would cut off the proportion of the audience who have not yet purchased digital receivers. To remain viable, Channel 31 needs to be accessible to the entire local free-to-air audience.

As the additional costs of simulcasting would be significant, government assistance would be required to meet the distribution and transmission costs of digital broadcasting during the simulcast period. Channel 31 would continue to meet the costs of analogue transmission.

Section 5 – Executive Summary

In conclusion, C31 Melbourne operates a television station that offers airtime to local communities, minority groups and communities that do not receive exposure or have a voice in the mainstream media.

The station's operational facilities and objectives ensure that it is an important component in Melbourne and Geelong's media-landscape, with a focus upon localism and diversity.

Currently, C31 Melbourne is enjoying the benefits of strong participation and a large following, which has enabled MCTC to offer great programming, training facilities and recognition programs for its program providers and viewers, and has been able to employ a sufficient number of staff to ensure that this level of community interaction continues to be viable.

With the increasing take-up of conversion to digital and pay television services within the community, C31 Melbourne faces the impending threat of losing viewers and funding, which will negatively impact upon the operation of the station.

As 23.7% of Australian households subscribe to Pay TV services⁵, C31 Melbourne has an additional threat of losing viewers to these subscription based services that do not transmit the station. As C31 cannot afford to pay the commercial rates to broadcast on Pay TV, we propose that the government mandates retransmission of community television on Pay TV free of charge.

MCTC would like the government to take these elements into consideration and agree to provide access to digital spectrum, fund the digital transmission of Melbourne's C31 and allow the continuation of MCTC's analogue broadcasting, until the analogue cut off date.

In accordance with its long standing practice, C31 would continue to meet the costs of its analogue transmission.

⁵ The Australian Subscription Television and Radio Association



Appendix 1:

C31 Melbourne Content Feedback

C31 Melbourne Content Feedback

'To whom it may concern,

I would like to know more about the TV Hellas program that was shown on Weds 4th Jan 2006 @ 8:30pm. It was a Greek concert that went for approx one and a half hours. Could you tell me the female singers name, the shows name (if it had one?) and if this show is available on DVD.

I appreciate any assistance that you can give me on the above subject. Keep up the great work, you have some great shows on C31.

Best Regards,

Con G' (email feedback, 5 January, 2006)

'could you please tell me the site I can get the recipes from the Indian cooking shown on Sat. afternoon.

Thanks,

Les.' (email feedback, 9 January, 2006)

'Hi im after a website where I can download the music you play on channel 31 at Friday nite the greek music just wondering if you can help me or if I can purchase it on dvd.

Regards,

Gerry' (email feedback, 9 January, 2006)

'Hi there, can you provide the contact details for the Careers Corner show as seen on Tuesday Evening (7:30pm) (10/1/06) please.

Love 31 it's got some great shows and is highly professional

Geoff D' (email feedback, 11 January, 2006)

'G'day C31 people!

Just wanted to tell you that Vasili's Garden is a top show. By far the best thing on telly at the time. The host is a lovable chap, and does a fantastic job. Well done and thank you!

Cheers,

Steve' (email feedback, 11 January, 2006)

'Thanks for your alternative viewing, becoming quite a fan. Watched Flavours Of India today and saw a great receipt for vegetable curry tried site flavourson31@hotmail.com for a copy but was unsuccessful could you please help. Jim' (email feedback, 11 January, 2006)



Appendix 2:

Impact of Digital Television Uptake on C31 Melbourne