

**PARLIAMENT OF AUSTRALIA, HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES STANDING
COMMITTEE ON COMMUNICATIONS, INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY AND THE ARTS
Community Broadcasting Inquiry.**

Submission from Bega Access Radio (Edge FM 93.7)

ToR 1: The scope and role of Australian Community Broadcasting across radio, television, the internet and other broadcasting technologies.

Background

The strengths and weaknesses of Edge FM 93.7 are best understood in their geographical context. The station is located at Bega in far south-eastern NSW. The Bega Valley Local Government Area had a population of 31,477 in June 2003 and the index of relative socio-economic advantage/disadvantage was in the fourth decile. The area, although on or near the coast, is remote, and contains a number of tiny isolated hamlets. Canberra, three hours drive away, is the nearest centre of any size. There is no railway anywhere and the small aeroplane that flies to Sydney and Melbourne is very expensive. In 2003, the average individual taxable income was around \$33,000, and over 9000 of the population was on income support of some kind (ABS 1379.0.55.001).

The Bega Valley consists of rolling hills, valleys and some mountainous areas. Reception of our signal is varied, with some of the smaller hamlets not receiving it at all.

In this context, there is great potential for community radio broadcasting to be an important asset. In many cases, television can only be received with expensive booster systems, and then reception is poor. Broadband internet is unavailable away from the main population centres and even telephony for dial-up is problematic.

Edge FM

A not-for-profit, community radio station, we broadcast through about one third of the Bega Valley. The station has very strong links to the local community, particularly through arts, charity and church groups, plus local business by virtue of our very cost effective advertising.

The station currently has around 85 paid-up subscribers.

Edge FM 93.7 is run entirely by volunteers who, in reflection of the demographics of the area, are all in the 45 or older age group. (The Bureau of Statistics' 2003 figures put this proportion of the Bega Valley population at 46.3% and trending higher).

The ethnic diversity of the volunteers mirrors that of the population. In 2001, the latest year for which ABS figures are available, there were 617 indigenous persons; and only 756 of the overseas-born population spoke languages other than English. These figures mean that apart from the indigenous population, the other language or

cultural groups are too small and scattered currently to support special programming or provide volunteers.

Volunteers are acquired through advertising on our own station, letterbox drops, and word of mouth. Apart from our presenters and office volunteers, the station does not have the resources to provide training opportunities to the wider community.

The station is situated in the de-commissioned Bega hospital building, or what remains of it after it was severely damaged by fire two years ago. It was previously the hub of the community and volunteer sector, but now houses only a craft shop, pottery studio and Edge FM. The reasonable rent offsets the less than ideal access and facilities.

The station operates on a very small budget. Given the demographics of the region as described above, the competition for the community's donated dollar is fierce, as it is for sponsorship. We have unreliable, ageing equipment, no resources for outside broadcasts, and are unable to do talkback. We cannot afford a fax machine or even broadband internet. Nevertheless, staff morale is high and we are continually surprised by the number of listeners we have.

ToR 2: Content and programming requirements that reflect the character of Australia and its cultural diversity.

Edge FM has a strong relationship with the local council, public library and art gallery; and with community and charity groups. Our inexpensive advertising rates are very important to local small businesses that continually struggle to survive in this area. The station works closely with SERTEC Ltd, a local not-for-profit organisation that provides employment, business counselling and community development. We have recently broadcast a series of interviews with them on training and employment opportunities.

Each month we put to air around 65-70 free community announcements for sporting, charity, art and emergency services groups etc, most of them multiple times.

Edge broadcasts a weekly program with local art news and interviews, a women's show, as well as four programs auspiced by local Christian groups. A new show highlighting interesting youth music will be going to air as soon as the young presenter completes training. The station also subscribes to the indigenous *Deadly Sounds* programs produced by the Community Broadcasting Network. Edge FM broadcasts enormously varied music that includes world music, jazz, country (particularly Australian country music), folk, rock and classical. Our listeners very much appreciate having alternatives to the Top 40 playlist.

Edge has recently revitalised its policy of encouraging local artists, through interviews and airtime for their music. We would like to do much more.

We would also like to do more local news gathering and broadcasting as the Bega Valley needs more parochial news opportunities, but again the station does not have the resources.

ToR 3. (a) Technological opportunities, including digital, to expand community broadcasting networks.

Edge would be able to take advantage of very few of the technological advances available in the future, or even currently. We are constrained by lack of money for purchase and servicing of equipment and lack of technical skill among our volunteers.

ToR 3. (b) Opportunities and threats to achieving a diverse and robust network of community broadcasters.

Edge FM's budget this consisted of the following

Income 2004-2005 \$18,778

<i>Item</i>	<i>% of income</i>
Sponsorship	50.1%
Grants	26.3%
Membership subscriptions	13.6%
Presenters fees	7.5%
Fundraising, donations etc	2.5

Expenditure 2004-2005 \$17,150

<i>Item</i>	<i>% of expenditure</i>
Equipment, new, repair/maint	53%
Licence fees	11.7%
Insurance	7%
Telephone/dial-up	6.2%
Electricity	6.1%
Rent, advertising, stationery etc	16%

Due to the low population density in our transmission area, fund-raising opportunities are limited so the main constraint faced by Edge FM is the lack of a guaranteed income stream. Without this, the station will always be operating hand-to-mouth and unable to reach its full potential as an inclusive, local voice.

Transmission power parity with local commercial stations would help expand our listening and membership base but we would first need funds to install and sustain this. With an income stream we would improve our studio equipment up to complete broadcast standard, purchase a new Studio Transmitter Link and engage a broadcast consultant to do a complete sweep over our transmission operations to ensure they were balanced and operating efficiently. We are also in need of a networked computer system.

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For
Bega Access Radio Committee