

Community Television Left Out Again

Following Minister Conroy's media release on Tuesday 12th March and the apparent promise of spectrum access certainty for Community Television (CTV), the CTV sector was optimistic that the long-running uncertainty of its transmission future would finally be resolved. However, it appears that CTV has been left out of the proposed Media Reform bills presented to Parliament.

This is a most curious outcome considering the Minister's words in the media release.

The Minister's media release stated that the media reforms would include "Supporting community television services following digital switchover by providing them a permanent allocation of a portion of Channel A" (i.e. the sixth channel spectrum), and that "The Government will secure spectrum for Community television on the sixth channel".

However, the bills presented to the Parliament make no mention of community television.

There is a provision that there are to be no more than three commercial broadcasters, preventing the sixth channel spectrum from being used for a fourth commercial network. The Explanatory Memorandum to one of the bills states that "the proposed statutory cap [of three] on the number of commercial television broadcasting services in a licence area is designed to ensure that the remaining capacity in the television broadcasting services bands [i.e. the sixth channel] is made available for other type of broadcasting services – including (but not limited to) community television broadcasting services – as well as being available to test new broadcasting technologies as they emerge". But this does not constitute a guarantee of access for CTV.

The Community TV licensees' collective sense of this is that essentially, there is no change to CTV's current situation. There is no mandated access to spectrum for community television. Whilst the sixth channel spectrum remains unused for other purposes, the ACMA can assign transmitter licences to community television stations to use that spectrum. But potentially a future government could decide to allocate a licence to use part or all of the sixth channel to some other entity, and that licensee would not be legislatively bound to continue carrying the community television services, thus potentially spelling the end of CTV in Australia.

There are thousands of community program makers across all sectors of society including the CALD sector, universities and TAFE colleges (students & lecturers alike) and viewers who are demonstrably strong supporters of community television. Not to mention the many volunteers who through open public access to free-to-air television have been able to learn the craft of television production, materially improving their resumes and then been able go on to working in the mainstream television and production industries, either behind or, in some cases, in front of the camera.

The primary purpose of community television is to provide public access to the dominant medium of free-to-air television, allowing interested members of the community to conceive, write and produce television programs that are broadcast to thousands of people. This makes it is an essential element of a functioning democracy and an important tool for protecting regular citizens' rights to freedom of expression. Viewers gain value from having a television service available which is a distinct alternative to other television channels. Community television provides program content that the audience cannot see elsewhere, within the familiar and accessible format of free-to-air television. Community television is an important and worthwhile part of the Australian free-to-air television broadcasting landscape

Despite the Minister's fine supportive words in his press release, he has not followed through with any action in his proposed legislation.

Community television will effectively continue to exist in a state of uncertainty about its transmission future, with no guaranteed access to spectrum. Access to broadcasting spectrum for CTV must be mandated to ensure the continuation of open public access to free- to-air television and an invaluable industry based training opportunity for our next generation of program content producers.