



Senator Linda Reynolds  
Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications  
PO Box 6100  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

11 March 2016

Dear Ms Reynolds,

It is with pleasure that I forward to you Deakin University's submission to the Inquiry into the Australian Broadcasting Corporation Amendment (Rural and Regional Advocacy) Bill 2015, which was introduced to Parliament by Senator Bridget McKenzie.

Deakin University believes this Bill, in addressing the ABC's delivery of services to rural and regional Australia and its public service mandate for rural and regional journalism, is particularly important for the future of regional Australia.

This submission has been prepared by Dr Kristy Hess, Dr Julie Freeman and Dr Lisa Waller from the School of Communication and Creative Arts at Deakin. Their research on local news has been published in leading academic publications throughout the world and they have received funding from university, government, not-for-profit and philanthropic agencies to examine community, civic and/or hyper-local news delivery in Australia and overseas. With support of philanthropic foundations, Deakin University created a research group in 2016 to focus intently on regional media in Australia. This was supported with the appointment of a research fellow (Dr Julie Freeman) to examine news and civic participation in rural and regional Australia. Dr Kristy Hess and Dr Lisa Waller are co-authors of *Local Journalism in the Digital World*, soon to be published by Palgrave MacMillan in the UK.

I commend this submission to the Bill and its recommendations to the Senate Standing Committee.

Best wishes

Professor Jane den Hollander  
**Vice Chancellor**



## **Deakin University**

### **Submission**

### **Australian Broadcasting Corporation Amendment (Rural and Regional Advocacy) Bill 2015**

11 March 2016

#### **Preamble**

Thank you for the invitation to offer a submission to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation Amendment (Rural and Regional Advocacy) Bill 2015.

Deakin University offers its support towards the Bill, noting that amendments to the ABC Charter are imperative in allocating the necessary resources to build the capacity of ABC rural and regional newsrooms and journalists to deliver quality local news.

In a time of mass commercial media consolidation and declines in local coverage, greater consideration must be given to the ABC's provision of local news and information and ensuring a diversity of voices are both present in, and represented by, rural and regional communities.

Public service broadcasters play important roles in the social construction of communities and ensuring local democracy. Economic challenges need to be carefully weighed against potentially jeopardising these roles in rural and regional communities.

To inform evidence-based policy, we recommend that the ABC commission further research into determining what the local news and information needs of rural and regional communities are and whether these are being met. This can be used to ensure the efficient use of future funding for rural and regional broadcasting.

### **a) Resourcing rural and regional newsrooms**

Rural and regional media outlets are facing increasing economic pressures in the digital media environment. Declining resources impact the availability and quality of local journalism and limit capacity for newsgathering, investigative reporting and independent analysis (Hess, Waller & Ricketson, 2014; Richards, 2014). The closure of local newsrooms in favour of centralised production, together with the increasing homogenisation of news across print, online and broadcast platforms, results in content that is less relevant to local audiences in rural and regional communities and restricts the diversity of voices being heard regularly from remote regions. The ABC is not immune from the pressures facing the commercial sector. It has experienced significant government funding cuts, shed jobs and centralised regional news offices. Outgoing ABC Managing Director Mark Scott has even called for a 'grown-up conversation' about merging with the SBS to ensure the viability of two public broadcasters (Norman, 2016). While rural and regional Australians have access to more information than ever before in a digital world, they are receiving less news that is relevant to them at the local level. Moreover, community broadcasters often do not have the capacity to produce local news (Finkelstein Inquiry, 2012). In these tumultuous times, it is imperative to consider the crucial role performed by the ABC in the production and dissemination of local news in Australia's rural and regional communities.

The potential relaxation of media ownership and reach rules under the Turnbull Government may result in a period of rapid consolidation of commercial providers, which could have profound implications for the ABC in rural and regional areas. While regional broadcasters – Prime, WIN, Southern Cross Austereo and Imparja – urge changes to media ownership laws to protect local news services, abolishing the reach rule and two-out-of-three rule may open the gate for more mergers and takeovers, limiting media diversity and plurality of reporting in the bush. Consolidation in the commercial sphere could result in additional pressure on the ABC to extend coverage or fill growing news gaps in rural and regional areas. The question on policymakers' minds should be how loosening media restrictions will impact upon public service broadcasting and the quality of its local news in all corners of the country.

The ABC's regional structural reforms and centralisation of staff to metropolitan areas bring threats to community ties and local employment, with programming cuts potentially creating news and information content gaps in rural and regional Australia, such as occurred when *Bush Telegraph* was axed in late 2014. The parlous situation of rural and regional commercial news media suggests public broadcasting of news relevant to rural/regional areas is more essential than ever and the support and resources required to produce quality local journalism ought to be bolstered. This is particularly important given the public trust placed in the ABC as the least biased and most balanced provider of news (Finkelstein Inquiry, 2012). In the wake of government funding cuts, it is not satisfactory for the ABC to strip its regional news resources as a first wave of change, nor to argue that the proponent of this Bill has a 'narrow conception of localism' (Maher, 2016). At the very least, an assessment of the effectiveness of the ABC's rural/regional news structure should be undertaken.

The quality of local news content relies on production by journalists familiar with local areas. Adequate resources need to be invested in rural and regional areas to ensure the production of local content and facilitate the development of quality journalism. Remote regions that are not adequately serviced by commercial media providers deserve more than tokenistic news coverage from the nation's public broadcaster. They require attention from journalists regardless of whether the stories generated have local, state or national-level appeal. Burns (2014) argues that considerable community benefit arises from 'local people telling stories for and about local people', with rural and regional media prime starting grounds for journalists and a valuable resource for local economies (see also Hess & Waller, 2014). Many rural and regional news reports are already produced hundreds of kilometres away from the towns to which they are broadcast, with smaller communities often entirely overlooked.

### *Resourcing during emergencies/disasters*

Locally-produced news is particularly important during the ABC's coverage of crisis situations to assist those who are directly affected by adverse events. Ryan's (2013) research into information seeking practices during flooding in Queensland highlights that information received from national sources required reinterpretation with the assistance of local knowledge, which can delay providing critical information to communities. The ABC, particularly local radio during power outages, is undoubtedly a key information source during emergencies (Ryan, 2013); this service should not be compromised to assist cost savings. North and Dearman (2010) highlighted the role of the ABC as the most reliable source of news and updates and as an avenue for people to share stories and connect with one another during and after the Black Saturday bushfires in Victoria. They underlined the importance of ABC Radio signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with emergency services agencies in 2004. This ensured it had access to relevant and up-to-date information and that emergency services could relay information to communities in times of crisis. But this research also found the MoU meant other news organisations struggled to gain timely access to emergency information because ABC was given priority. The authors note:

ABC Local Radio has used emergency broadcasting as a branding device, and in that sense emergency broadcasting can be seen as not just an important 'service to the community', but as a key rhetorical marker of relevance and innovation for 'branding' the organisation that the ABC has used in seeking to justify public investment. (p. 83)

Effective local communication is necessary for the resiliency of rural and regional communities before, during and after natural disasters (Freeman & Hancock, 2016). If the ABC continues to be the priority source for emergency information, then it must ensure it has resources in place to facilitate the effective and efficient release and dissemination of adequate local updates of crises in rural/regional Australia. To this end, it is imperative that the ABC's role in disaster reporting is independently assessed and the link between ABC emergency and ABC local reporting be comprehensively reviewed at a time of intense cost-cutting and restructure.

### **b) Involving regional people in decision-making about regions**

The decline in rural and regional news media does not mean there is a decline in demand for local news. Consultation with audiences is necessary to fully assess the impact of changes to the availability and quality of local ABC news and other content (Meadows, 2013). The proposed biennial survey of rural and regional audiences' satisfaction with ABC broadcasting (amendment 10) should be undertaken by an independent body as it is paramount in determining whether the information needs of these communities are successfully being met (Finkelstein Inquiry, 2012) and how they differ to those of Australia's urban populations. Moreover, the survey provides an opportunity for the ABC to also determine the types of content rural and regional communities' desire and in what format, so as to ensure the best use of limited resources in the future. Qualitative research through focus groups and interviews would be useful to complement the survey data and offer greater insight into communities' local information needs.

We furthermore suggest the survey be extended to examine rural and regional satisfaction with the ABC's digital presence, in addition to broadcasting as specified in the proposed amendments. The ABC's 2015 annual report, aptly entitled *All About Audiences*, documents that digital technologies (particularly mobile devices) are used to access more news than ever before. The ABC is certainly a pioneer in transitioning to digital services and should be commended for its attempts to further regional audiences' online engagement through *ABC Open*. However, fast and reliable connectivity (internet and mobile) is a perennial problem in rural and regional Australia (Middleton & Park, 2014) and uneven access to digital content is yet to fill gaps created by reductions in traditional rural/regional media outlets (Nielsen, 2015). ACMA (2013) research *Regional Australians' Access to Local Content* found that 39 per cent of respondents prefer televised local news, while the internet

was preferred by only 14 per cent of respondents. The satellite and fixed wireless National Broadband Network connections servicing rural and regional Australia have inferior speeds and bandwidth in comparison to urban connections. Online content is not a solution for those with poor connectivity or limited socio-economic circumstances (such as constraints related to age, income and literacy levels) in rural and regional areas and connectivity challenges also inhibit alternative sources like hyperlocal community media from enhancing local media plurality, particularly in comparison to their rapid proliferation in metropolitan areas (Barnett & Townend, 2015). The ABC is already producing entertainment programs that are sent straight to iView (ABC, 2015a), which means people with limited connectivity are disadvantaged for content choice. A broader research approach would offer vital insight into the challenges and inequities of accessing both broadcast and online content in rural and regional communities.

A further point relates to reconsidering what the ABC deems to be rural and regional and to properly distinguish media access and use in different areas. Reporting from large centres such as Newcastle, which should perhaps no longer be categorised as regional, varies considerably to that which is produced in Riverland and each area faces different challenges in relation to the gathering, production and dissemination of local content. Clearer distinctions between what areas are considered rural, remote, regional, regional cities and other areas would assist in addressing news and content gaps in local coverage. The size and scope of 'local' areas covered by both public and commercial broadcasters therefore requires imminent review (Hess & Waller, 2016), particularly given the proposed media reforms hint at the possibility of rewarding locally produced content. Localism itself is a subjective concept. The ABC performs a role in establishing narratives around local identity and country life in Australia for national audiences. Helping to address the news needs of small communities and ensuring a diversity of views from rural residents is not a narrow conception of localism, it goes to the very heart of what the ABC should stand to represent.

Once these types of areas are properly distinguished, it will be possible to ensure that a broad diversity of rural and regional perspectives is reflected within ABC decision-making. The appointment of individuals who reside in rural/regional Australia to the Rural and Regional Advisory Council is necessary to ensure voices from the bush are adequately represented in this time of mass media consolidation. The insight and guidance offered by a Council with diverse membership is necessary to consider when making decisions that shape the availability and quality of local news and content in Australia's rural and regional futures. The ABC must ensure that appointees to the Council represent the diversity of rural/regional Australia, not just the nation's largest regional centres, to balance the varying viewpoints and experiences of its members. The ABC may also wish to consider the inclusion of external representatives on this Council. A member of the Australian academic community could contribute expertise and research on national and international trends in rural and regional news, or a representative from the Australian Local Government Association would offer specific insight into the challenges around local reporting during emergency situations. The knowledge of these types of members would constructively inform the Council as well as the Board's decisions relating to rural and regional broadcasting.

#### *Keeping regional decision-makers accountable*

News media and local governments play important roles in upholding local democracy. The ABC is often celebrated for its quality political reporting on a national scale, yet little attention has been paid to its effectiveness in reporting government decisions at the local level (Hess & Waller, 2008). Anecdotal evidence suggests ABC reporters are rarely physically present at council meetings held in rural Australia, especially in areas poorly serviced by other commercial news providers. This is a surprisingly overlooked area of the ABC's Charter as there are 559 local councils across Australia that serve a diverse range of communities (Freeman, 2015). Local councils spend more than \$32 billion each year providing infrastructure, economic and community services and employ more than 188,000 people (Australian Local Government Association, 2016). The ABC's relationship to this third

tier of government needs to be properly analysed to ensure it is upholding its vital Fourth Estate function that it so pledges.

### **c) Contributing to a sense of geographic and cultural diversity**

Consideration needs to be afforded to what is determined to be 'local' news and content, as well as who decides this; which may require clarification when revising the ABC's radio service obligations to 'consist solely or primarily of regional or local news' (amendment 15). The abundance of international and national news and other content available through digital platforms has created a media market demanding more local content (Waller & Hess, 2015). As noted by the ABC, 'in an environment in which audiences can access a world of information and develop truly global perspectives, investigating and reporting at a local level becomes more important than ever,' (ABC, 2015b, p. 12). Research shows the availability of local information is directly related to enhancing civic life and community social capital in regional Australia (Bowd, 2012; Hess, 2016; Richards, 2014). The ABC plays an important role in constructing a sense of local identity and community cohesion as well as fulfilling a vital democratic role in helping to ensure local political accountability. This depends, however, upon broadcasting sufficient coverage of local news and information.

The needs of society should be considered in conjunction with the economic and political concerns of media organisations (Picard, 2013). Cuts in rural and regional areas for improved efficiency savings need to be carefully weighed against the ABC's public service function in the production of local rural/regional news. The fact that small towns and cities are harder to reach and more expensive to cover should not mean they miss out on quality coverage of regional affairs and they deserve more than tokenistic media coverage of their regions. News gaps are created when journalism is practised from further afield across multiple platforms. The ABC should bolster its public service mandate from a social and civic-purpose position rather than continuing to centralise operations like commercial media. The key to success in digital times rests upon news outlets having an intimate knowledge and appreciation of their communities.

Local news outlets connect people and keep them in touch with the places and events where they live or work and they keep an eye on councils, courts and police in the interests of democracy. This may be difficult to achieve when local information is produced a thousand kilometres away in a different state (Hess & Waller, 2016). Media plurality and local content suffer in times of mass commercial consolidation when fewer voices represent rural and regional communities. The ABC should protect and enhance the types of news and information made available to people across rural and regional Australia (Waller & Hess, 2014). Public broadcasters must prioritise communities underserved for local news and content in order to prevent further marginalisation and disenfranchisement.

## **Conclusion and recommendations**

Declines in commercial media operations in rural and regional areas and the potential impact of proposed changes to ownership and reach rules are likely to shape the future of public service broadcasting and its obligation to ensure access to local information. Rather than continue down the same path as commercial providers that are centralising operations, it may be pertinent for the ABC to further bolster its rural and regional presence to enhance its contributions to the formation of geographically distinct local identities, community cohesion and local democracy.

Deakin University offers its support towards the ABC Rural and Regional Advocacy Bill, noting that amendments to the ABC Charter are imperative in allocating the necessary resources to building the capacity of ABC rural and regional journalists in delivering quality local news, including further resourcing newsrooms and staff beyond metropolitan locations. Provisions should be in place to protect local newsrooms that help to ensure a diversity of voices in rural and regional areas. Policy settings need to accommodate how to best serve the news and information needs of rural and

regional communities in a shifting media environment. Moreover, consideration should be afforded to further understanding distinctions between rural and regional areas, as well as what is deemed to be 'local' content.

The inclusion of rural and regional-based representatives on the Rural and Regional Advisory Council is an important step towards ensuring the voices of underserved communities are heard, as is surveying audience satisfaction with ABC broadcasting in rural and regional communities. However, it is recommended that this research also seek to determine the local news and information needs of rural and regional communities, including types of local content and preferred formats, to ensure the efficient use of limited ABC funding for rural and regional broadcasting in the future.

***Deakin University supports the Australian Broadcasting Corporation Amendment (Rural and Regional Advocacy) Bill 2015, and we offer the following recommendations:***

1. Independent research should be undertaken to determine where news gaps exist in rural and regional Australia; where they are in danger of emerging and how the ABC's Charter might best address this. The findings can be used to plan resourcing and staffing of ABC rural/regional newsrooms.
2. If the ABC is to continue its Memorandum of Understanding with Emergency Service agencies, an independent assessment is needed to determine whether the ABC is providing adequate resources in local communities during emergencies/crises, especially those distanced from the Corporation's existing news hubs outside capital cities.
3. The implementation of a biennial survey of rural and regional audiences' satisfaction with ABC broadcasting should be complemented with qualitative research to comprehensively assess what the information needs of these communities are and whether they are being met. Extending the research to include satisfaction with online content would also provide vital insight into the challenges and inequities rural and regional communities face when accessing local information through both broadcast and online sources.
4. The ABC should consider external rural and regional appointees to the Rural and Regional Advisory Council, such as a local government representative and a member of the Australian academic community with interests in rural/regional news media and who preferably reside in rural/regional locations.
5. Research should be undertaken to determine how the ABC defines 'local' rural and regional audiences and its commitment to coverage of local government affairs in municipalities across rural/regional Australia.

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