



ACROSS THE SPECTRUM

More and more Australians are tuning into community broadcasting, but it faces many challenges, as a House of Representatives committee is finding out.

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If you are a student of Australian history then any reference to “Document J” will reek of the Petrov Affair. That is unless your area of speciality is broadcasting, in which case you will immediately think of the sensational start to a Whitlam-era conference on community radio.

In early 1974, the Whitlam government’s media department grudgingly agreed to host a wide-ranging conference to discuss developments in community broadcasting, and delegates poured into Canberra from around the nation. But, on the morning of the conference, the *Australian* published a leaked version of the department’s vision for the sector, which appeared to have already stitched up the outcome.

What became known as “Document J” outraged the delegates who promptly set up the Public Broadcasting Association of Australia to work out a vision of their own.

The path since followed has been largely community-driven and tremendously successful. There are now 442 community radio stations, 37 aspirant stations, seven licensed television services and 160 Indigenous radio and television stations dotted across the nation.

That perhaps explains why the government now seeks the sector’s advice when it comes to planning its future.

Earlier this year, the House of Representatives Committee on Communications, Information Technology and the Arts was tasked with conducting an inquiry into community broadcasting. It has been asked to report on:

- the scope and role of Australian community broadcasting across radio, television, the internet and other broadcasting technologies;
- content and programming requirements that reflect the character of Australia and its cultural diversity;
- technological opportunities, including digital, to expand community broadcasting networks; and
- opportunities and threats to achieving a diverse and robust network of community broadcasters.

Given the vibrancy of the sector, it is hardly surprising there has been a tremendous response, or that it reflects a vast array of views.

There has been a massive growth in this kind of broadcasting over the past 30 years, but radio still holds centre stage, with a television cameo and other technologies acting in supporting roles.

of \$177,805 and average expenditure of \$171,809. However, those figures probably paint a rosier picture of the sector's finances than most experience, as some stations earned as little as \$5,000 that year.

Lack of resources is a recurring theme in many of the inquiry's submissions, with some unable to come to terms with legislated sponsorship limits. The sector gets about 35 per cent of its income by way of sponsorship, but that is limited to five minutes an hour and must contain explicit acknowledgement of a sponsor's support.

3MFM South Gippsland says the current arrangements discriminate against small business and small regional towns that do not have the resources to access commercial radio, which is usually based in a regional centre.

Meanwhile, costs are being driven up by the steady march in transmission fees. The national transmission network of 578 broadcast towers covering over 98 per cent of the Australian population was privatised in April 1999. The Commonwealth sold to NTL Australia for \$650

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On 28 June 1972, Radio VL-5UV in Adelaide was the first licensed community station to go to air. Today, according to the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts submission to the inquiry, community broadcasting is the largest of the three types of radio service—the ABC has 60 local radio stations and there are 274 commercial radio stations.

Community radio also has a surprising reach. The department funded research by McNair Ingenuity which showed that 24 per cent of radio listeners aged over 15 (3.76 million) tune in to community radio in a typical week, seven million listened at least once a month and 685,000 Australians listen exclusively to community broadcasting.

What community radio has most of though is variety, with the departmental submission noting it “makes a major contribution to achieving the government's objective of ensuring audiences have access to a diverse range of services”. The sector produces thousands of hours of ethnic and Indigenous broadcasting, has 15 print handicapped stations, 35 full-time religious stations, an array of generalist broadcasters and stations that focus on rural and remote communities, youth, seniors, arts, fine music. The list goes on.

Importantly, 35 per cent of radio stations are either the only radio service in their local area or the only source of local content.

The Community Broadcasting Association of Australia (CBAA) submission says the sector boasts 20,500 volunteers who contribute more than \$145 million in unpaid labour each year. This is what keeps the industry afloat because what it doesn't have much of is money.

The association says the sector only receives about six per cent of its funding from government. All stations operated on tight budgets with average income in 2002-03

million and, less than three years later, NTL sold the network for \$850 million to Macquarie Bank. The network now operates as Broadcast Australia and is listed on the Australian Stock Exchange under the banner of the Macquarie Communications Infrastructure Group.

The CBAA submission says community broadcasting is now subject to full commercial pricing, with transmission infrastructure costs increasing substantially as a percentage of total operating costs. The government has begun to subsidise this through the Transmission Access Fund, but it remains a concern and the association is urging the committee to support indexation of the funding.

Another common issue among the many voices of community broadcasting is the uncertain shape of the digital future. This is less of a worry for radio than television but is likely to be expensive for both.

Although it has a history almost as long as community radio, community television is limited to Adelaide, Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne, Perth, Mt Gambier and Lismore. But it does have a cumulative monthly audience reach of more than 3 million.

Its key concern is that it doesn't seem to have a place in the future, at least not according to that envisioned in the federal government's discussion paper *Meeting the digital challenge: reforming Australia's media in the digital age*.

That document said “the government is yet to finalise conversion strategies for community television broadcasters” and that is cause for genuine concern among stakeholders.

Perth's Access 31 speaks for all when it says “being left out of the digital world is the most serious threat to the continuation of community TV in all Australian metropolitan markets”.

Unlike digital radio, which is years away, digital television is in train and time is running out. The CBAA's

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3.76 million listeners tune in to community radio in a typical week.

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submission on community television says it “needs to be transmitting on the digital platform within 12 to 21 months [or] face serious financial hardship due to the steady decline of its existing and potential audience on analogue”.

Community television stations are the only free-to-air players still broadcasting exclusively in analogue, which is simply not available to any household that buys a digital set-top box or a new television.

The growing reach of pay TV is also a threat as its penetration has passed 25 per cent of Australian households. Access 31 notes that “the ABC and SBS are already available though pay TV and it’s only a matter of time before the commercial TV services are also on board. However, there is currently no plan in place to carry any real community TV services on pay television”. This is despite the fact that places like the United States have “must carry” regulations for pay television that require them to re-broadcast community services.

But while broadcasting in digital will prove a huge hurdle for both community radio and television, digital technology will continue to bring down production costs and improve the quality of broadcasts. Digital cameras

are becoming more affordable, as is digital editing technology for sound and vision.

Another opportunity for the sector is to continue the process of program and music exchange which got a massive boost with the advent of the Digital Delivery Network and the Australian Music Radio Airplay Project.

The delivery network allows the 150 connected stations to share content and is viewed as one of the most important innovations in the history of the sector. The music project provides a centralised service connecting artists and industry to broadcasters.

Alongside the key issues confronting the sector, there are myriad opportunities and threats on the horizon, as articulated in the 120 plus submissions to the inquiry. Many are as colourful as their broadcasts.

Take for example the submission from Huon FM, based in Geeveston (60 kilometres south of Hobart).

“Three years ago a local landholder cut the telephone line with a backhoe, putting us off air for 72 hours,” the station told the committee. ■

For more information on the community broadcasting inquiry visit www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/cita or email cita.reps@aph.gov.au or phone (02) 6277 4601.



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