

Submission to the Environment and Communications Legislation Committee regarding the Inquiry into the Australian Broadcasting Corporation Amendment (Rural and Regional Advocacy) Bill 2015

6th February 2017

SUMMARY:

This submission is from the *Save RN Music* Campaign in relation to recent cuts to music programming on Radio National: its impact on rural and regional listeners, particularly reduced access to arts content, and the premature reliance of the ABC on digital broadcasting in rural and regional areas.

It appears these changes were made without listener or music industry consultation, or research on audience impact, and displays an apparent lack of understanding of the demographic of the affected networks and listener behaviour.

LINKS:

Petition: <https://www.change.org/p/michael-mason-hands-off-radio-national-music>

Website: www.savernmusic.com

ABOUT US:

We are a volunteer group actively opposing cuts to 95% of Radio National's former music programming. In November 2016 the ABC announced that 'The Daily Planet', 'The Inside Sleeve', 'The Live Set', 'The Rhythm Divine', and 'Soundproof' would be discontinued on Radio National as of January 2017. The decision also saw 'Jazztrack' removed from RN content and now is only available through ABC Jazz (Digital).

In response to these announcements, a petition was launched in November 2016 that now has over 22,500 signatures. We have issued the ABC Board with two open letters, received two responses, and recently met with ABC Management (Michael Mason, Director of Radio; Chris Scaddan, Head of Music; Judith Whelan, Head of Spoken Word; Judith Maude, ABC Board Secretariat and meeting facilitator).

Throughout this campaign we have lobbied on behalf of listeners, musicians, and the Australian independent music industry for continued access to this content. Our concerns relating to rural and regional listeners as supported by this Bill are focused on the following issues:

1. Radio National as Australia's most accessible broadcasting service.

In their responses to our petition, rural and regional listeners have overwhelmingly commented that they rely on Radio National as their primary radio service (alongside Local ABC Radio) as their main connection to the rest of the country. Part of their sense of connection is being able to access music not available on commercial or local ABC radio, being able to listen to live music, faith music, music from different cultures, and music by independent Australian artists who regularly tour in, and appear at, the many festivals held in rural and regional areas

throughout Australia.

The ABC has clearly stated that, after these cuts, genres such as folk, blues and world will be covered, to a lesser extent, via Digital radio formats such as Double J and ABC Jazz, which are not easily accessible (other than via TV) in rural and regional areas.

2. The Inadequacies of Digital Services to provide music content to regional listeners.

Statistics and comments garnered from reputable sources suggest that digital services are, in general, extremely narrow in range of delivery and problematic at best. The Government's own Communications and Arts Department stated in a 2015 report that: "...the cost and complexity of rolling out Digital Audio Broadcasting Plus (DAB+)-based digital terrestrial radio services across regional Australia¹ present major challenges for the industry".²

Currently, DAB+ radio is only available in five capital cities, which means that access to a service like Double J forces rural and regional listeners to rely on internet access. A study of 13,000 Australians surveyed in regional areas (released this year) also tells us that: "...48 per cent of respondents said their internet was inadequate, or did not meet their current needs".³ This also suggests that access to ABC digital radio for regional listeners is necessarily a costly user-pays service.

Digital radio on TV? The argument that this is suitable access for the rural and regional lovers of diverse music who traditionally listen in the car, in the workplace or outdoors, is absurd. Of the seven networks the ABC says will feature music, just two provide traditional linear programming. Most provide only automated, jukebox-style playlists, not curated programs with artist backgrounds or cultural context. This is another blow for diversity and an attack on listeners outside of the city.

The ABC may argue that Triple J and Classic FM reach into rural and regional areas. However, the music affected by these cuts is not played on Classic FM, and only to a very small extent on Triple J. Furthermore, the Triple J demographic is very different to that of Radio National, and it is unrealistic to expect Triple J to accommodate the music losses from Radio National. This has effectively left a large culture gap in the ABC's music programming for rural and regional listeners not filled by digital offerings.

3. Cultural Impact of these Decisions to Rural and Regional Listeners and Communities.

As a result of this decision, rural and regional Radio National listeners will no longer have access to curated (music journalism and informative) musical content which serves to provide entertainment, educational and diverse cultural content to regional and rural audiences.

¹ Unless otherwise specified, references to regional Australia include remote licence areas.

² Australian Department of Communications, 'Digital Radio Report' (2015, p. 4).

³ See <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-06-21/almost-half-of-regional-australia-reports-internet-very-poor/7529734>, accessed 5 December 2016.

This decision will also impact rural and regional economies in regard to awareness of live music touring (national and international artists), tourism economies derived from live music events and festivals.

The music programs cut from Radio National also provided significant opportunities for rural and regional artists and musicians to gain exposure via national airplay, to tell their stories (often related to where they live and regional issues), and connect with the wider independent music ecosystem.

CONCLUSIONS:

The cuts to music programming result in significant issues: reduced expert curation, reliance on digital technology with a lower or negligible reach into regional areas than AM/FM and, consequently, loss of music to regional people.

While management has argued the cuts are a part of a strategic realignment of Radio National, they have the appearance of crude cost-cutting measures.

ABC Management recently acknowledged the importance of curation at a meeting with the campaign group. While we appreciate the ABC's difficult funding environment, the loss of two expert curators flies in the face of this acknowledgement.

Finally, while digital offers many opportunities, relying on this technology for delivery of programming to regional areas is premature, and perpetuates a city-centric approach.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

In relation to the above topics, we endorse the amendments put forward, particularly in relation to Items 3 to 6 – Section 6

Our recommendations:

- That until such time digital services are adequately accessible to the wider Australian community, the ABC should consult widely with rural and regional audiences in regard to the content provided on extant linear and free-to-air broadcasting platforms.
- That the ABC considers all its linear and free-to-air broadcasting services, including Radio National and ABC Local Radio, in continuing to provide diversity in cultural and artistic content of interest to rural and regional listeners.
- That a proposed Rural and Regional Advisory Council should consider making a strong commitment to fostering regional arts, regional artists and events.
- That the term 'journalism' includes arts and music journalism.

SOME COMMENTS FROM THE PETITION FROM RADIO NATIONAL'S REGIONAL AUDIENCE:

Magella: As a listener in a regional area, I particularly know the impact on the artistic, public health, and economic options in disadvantaged areas of our nation. A discontinuation or decommissioning of these music shows, represents a kick to the guts of the ABC's very own charter. And to the communities and audiences who depend on these programs for our mental health wellbeing, our cultural wellbeing and advancement, and for their powerful economic contributions.

Coralie: I live in a very rural area with very limited radio station options, both at home but in particular when driving. I do NOT want to be restricted to 'The footy' ...so often I have been grateful for the RN music offerings. This is a matter of rural equity ...we need the ABC to offer a variety of programs. The consideration of economic benefit is a very valid argument...the diverse music festivals spread throughout our huge land, depend on ABC for support, for airtime for musicians, for playing new music, for sharing information.

Anna: As a rural Tasmanian musician, I need access to hearing live performances of festivals I can't attend, and the diversity of music worldwide. Music diversity & exposure is crucial to Aus musical identities.

Maria: I listen to all the programs that are [to be] discontinued. I love the diversity in music they present. I do not listen to double J as I can only access it through my TV. No digital radio where I live.

Melanie: I live in regional, and RN music is what we wait all week for. There is no tv and digital, it has to be on the radio. Radio is music.

Peter: I love the music programs and can't access digital as we are in remote NSW. Terrible decision. Unfair decision.

Simon: There are many nights I sit in the dark listening intently to music on ABC radio. But the ABC continues to abandon Regional Australia where without mobile, TV or internet coverage we rely on the radio for keeping in touch with the world. Music is integral to the cultural dimensions of a civilized life. When Jazztrack was removed from Classic FM to an impossible time slot on RN as well as urban-centric (unreachable) digital radio, the abandonment set in. The other music programs on RN (The Inside Sleeve, The Daily Planet, The Rhythm Divine, The Live Set & RN Afternoons) are such a treat for those of us far away from urban concert halls and venues.

John: I work in outback South Australia driving a truck and the only radio stations available are local ABC and RN. On weekends Local ABC is almost entirely sport which I have no interest in. RN is a breath of fresh air. Internet, digital radio, JJJ and TV are not available.

Gerry: As a musician and a music educator living in regional NSW, there are virtually no other options for sourcing the diverse music RN provides. Digital radio doesn't exist here, you can't lug a TV around with you and mobile data is both expensive and limited.

Emily: I listen to the Inside Sleeve every day while I work on my farm. It is a program I look forward to everyday as it show cases our incredible Australian talent. It honours those musicians who are strengthening our identity.

Rob: My farm would be a lonely place without RN music

Bill: RN was all we had in the bush growing up on a cattle farm in the Back O Bourke.. Huge loss for rural communities without much choice in radio stations.

Bradford: I'm signing because I'm a musician and a farmer and rely heavily on the fantastic ABC programming.

Peter: I am appalled that the ABC, which is supposed to exist for all Australians, is cancelling so many well-loved and important music programs. The ABC has long been a supporter of independent and remote musicians, events and partnerships and as someone who lives remotely I have always appreciated this support. The bush is the heart of Australia and that is where the ABC is supposed to be. If this destruction of our national broadcaster's music programs occurs, I consider this is a sad indictment of the modern ABC.

Felicity: I love Radio National. Keeps me sane. Is ESPECIALLY important for people in regional areas whether for music, news or topical issues - we can't get to gigs, we don't get visited by international musicians, we don't have access to buzzing local grapevines and venues to hear what's happening. Don't ditch us in the bush.

Stephen: Living in rural Australia we rely exclusively on RN for our 'window' into the wider world. Along with many other RN programs the music offerings of RN are vitally important. There is more to music 'in the bush' than country and western!

Geoffrey: because i love these shows and they are a beacon of sanity out here in the bush

Bernadette: ABC Music has inspired, sustained, nurtured and healed me through two devastating droughts, four bushfires and decades of teaching adults and young people in rural communities. Indeed I've drawn on music that I first heard on RN to enhance & innovate teaching and learning. Digital radio is NOT available in the rural area that I live in and there is no timeline for when it will be available. Once again, decision makers in metro areas that are well served with a range of music choices deprive rural people of the best radio music programs available.

Kate: Music saves lives. It saves mine every day. It connects us to others on a level that crosses language and nationalities. So many rely on RN, especially in regional areas where they can't pop down the pub to see their favourite band. The repercussions of this move could be dire.

Ralf: I live in a regional area, RN's music programs showcase quality, diverse music to places where normal access is zero or minimal at best. I have purchased dozens of CDs & concert tickets after listening RN music programs. To me they are part of Australia's cultural fabric.

Wendy: The music content is so important to regional listeners, please don't take away our only musical connection to the real world!

Ian: These programs are important to regional areas and regional musicians.

Kirsten: I live in regional Australia. Radio National's music programs help me feel in touch with what is going on in the rest of the world. The people you are marginalising by taking away these programs are, once again, regional Australians.

Valerie: I'm signing because we have so many great musicians in Australia (many beavered away in rural and regional areas) who would be denied the wider audience they deserve if RN cuts back these programs. Our Australian music is unique and is a vital part of our land. Please don't leave our artists without access to their potential audience.

Patricia: In Regional Australia, there are no opportunities to attend concerts for musical education and experience. We strongly rely on radio to bring high quality music to us. These cuts will increase our move towards a cultural desert and widen the gap between city affluence and rural poverty.

Rianta: Music is such an integral part of so many lives. Especially in so many regional areas, programs such as The Inside Sleeve give our community resources that would otherwise be undiscovered. I'm a music teacher, and have many students who actively listen to these programs and download their podcasts to widen their listening variety. We have many intellectual conversations that are authentic about this music, which is quite rare in our educational environment. For shame ABC, thinking that these cuts would go either unnoticed or undisputed. You clearly need to listen to your listeners!