

Good morning.

On behalf of the Council of the Shire of Wyalkatchem, please accept the following as a formal submission to the inquiry.

The Shire of Wyalkatchem is located 194km north-east of Perth in the central Wheatbelt of Western Australia. The Shire has a population of 523 (2011 ABS census) and a demographic that is skewed outside working age (27.2% aged 65 years or greater, compared to Australia 12.3%; and, 47.1% aged 50 years or greater, compared to Australia 30.4%). Primary production, predominantly wheat and sheep agriculture, with some support services such as agronomy and transport, is the major source of economic activity. Access to education, health services, public transport, retail services, telecommunications (including internet) and cultural enterprise are ongoing challenges. Population drift to the state capital and the fiscal difficulties of state and federal governments is compounding the ability of citizens to access services of all kinds. Access to traditional media is under pressure with the closure in 2015 of a major regional newspaper, the Merredin-Wheatbelt Mercury after more than 100 years; mobile and internet is unavailable to large tracts of the Wheatbelt and where available is constricted in its value by bandwidth and reliability.

This makes the ability to access relevant information and knowledge even more important in ensuring social cohesion and economic capacity of all centres outside the metropolitan area. Cultural and educational experience, often easily available to many Australians, is less accessible to residents of rural and regional Australia. This is certainly true of this district and access to information, knowledge and cultural experience via electronic media is of vital importance. Rural and regional Australia has a unique cultural heritage, values and qualities; indeed, the more iconic characteristics of Australian culture have their origins in regional Australia. Rural and regional Australia retains a different lifestyle, landscape and environment to that which predominates in coastal environs. This needs to be reflected in the media available and accessed by those living and working in regional and rural Australia.

To maximise this value, content must be relevant, easily shared and accessed and be supportive of the values of those availing themselves of the content. In addition, it must also contribute to improving the quality of life and economic opportunity of those who presented with the content.

It is our submission that a reduction in media choice is contrary to these aims. The centralising of channels resulting in a metropolitan focus or reducing programme offers, such as removal of rural and regional news, will make for a paucity of local knowledge and information and further disadvantage rural and regional Australia. This diminishes the cultural diversity of Australia and potentially damages economic opportunity, thereby exacerbating the issues faced by communities. Indeed, it could be argued that the narrowing of opportunity squeezes out the possibility of innovation.

It is requested that the Government consider carefully support for innovation while pursuing the retention of knowledge and the provision of relevant information, education, news and cultural experiences by the retention and encouragement of electronic media services in rural and regional Australia. Some suggestions are funding for dedicated units in the ABC and SBS and programme support for commercial entities; dedicated digital channels; considered local content laws.

Thank you for this opportunity.

Regards,

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