

**Submission to the Inquiry into the Australian Broadcasting Corporation
Amendment (Rural and Regional Advocacy) Bill 2015**

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Background:

I am a senior lecturer in journalism at RMIT University. Over the last 11 years I have worked with just under 1,000 journalism students. Many of my former students are now working for media organisations in regional and rural areas across Australia and I remain in contact with them. Some of their opinions are attached at the end of this submission.

I grew up and began my journalism career in regional Queensland (Rockhampton). I subsequently worked at a senior journalist at the ABC, including as the ABC's Central Queensland Regional News Editor in the early 1990s. Many friends and former colleagues remain on properties and towns in some of the most isolated places in Australia.

My submission centres on my belief that regional and rural Australians require the access to the same strong and diverse media as Australians in metropolitan areas.

Access to free and fair media is a vital element of our democratic tradition and process. I believe that media literacy is an essential human right.

Introduction

The Bill proposes to amend the ABC's Charter in relation to delivery of services to rural and regional Australia and to define the ABC's mandate for its public service function for journalism in rural and regional Australia.

Overall the amendments should be broadly welcomed by those who live, or have interests, in rural and regional Australia. It is important to define the Corporation's mandate for its public service function for journalism in rural and regional Australia and to acknowledge the government has no place in attempting to dictate ABC editorial policy or opinion.

However, there are parts of the Bill that could be improved, and importantly the recommended changes should be mirrored by an appropriate increase in the ABC's budget to reflect the expanded emphasis on regional and rural areas.

Rural and Regional Advisory Council

1. The Bill's requirement for the ABC Board to establish a Rural and Regional Advisory Council could enable a significant improvement of services to areas outside Sydney and Melbourne if appropriate appointments are made from people with a diversity of views and experiences.

In my experience, most Australian raised in Sydney and Melbourne consider anyone living outside a capital city to be rural" whereas people in regional towns live what can best be described as a normal suburban life, far from any farm.

Two Board members living in regional Australia

2. The requirement for the Board to have at least two directors who reside in regional areas could potentially help maintain high standards of service to rural and regional Australia. The Bill could go further by mandating that at least one Board member is from a regional city and one from a more remote location, and that the overall composition of the Board fully represents all Australians.

Indigenous Board members

3. Appointments from indigenous and multicultural groups should be mandatory for the Board, as these groups remain the most isolated and disadvantaged in regional and rural Australia.

Emergency broadcasting

4. Keeping the obligations on the Corporation to roster effectively in emergency broadcasting situations is vital so that production can ensure community safety while complying with employee health and safety standards.

A decision to start emergency broadcasting should to be able to be made at a local level, rather than waiting for a decision-maker in a capital city.

Adequate funding

5. While it's great the Bill is mandating these conditions there needs to be a significant extra budgetary allocation in recognition of the expanded role of the ABC in the bush.
6. It is also important the Corporation is given appropriate funds to facilitate employment of a proportion of staff in regional areas, and to ensure these staff include senior people able to train and provide leadership for more junior staff. This recognises the Corporation's mandate to invest in 'market-failure' domains for the attached public and social benefits.

Consultation and reporting

7. It is important the Bill keeps the ABC to account by forcing consultation with communities on significant changes of transmission content in rural and regional areas. Reporting on comparison of regional and metropolitan employment figures is also vital along with ratios of journalists to support staff and the particulars of hours of local rural and regional news broadcasts, aggregated by broadcast area.

Biennial survey

8. If the amendment for a biennial survey of regional audiences to assess their satisfaction with ABC services remains, it should be conducted by an independent organisation to eliminate potential to push a management or political agenda.

Commitment to broadcast

9. While problems remain with accessing internet and download speeds, it is vital the ABC continue its commitment to broadcast and not just defer to online content.
10. Digital literacy in rural, regional and remote Australia remains a significant problem. There is no equality of access.
11. The Bill could go further, and mandate a boost to local television news and current affairs in regional and rural areas. Television (and streamed online content) remains the preferred avenue for Australians to access their news. A resumption of local regional television news bulletins (which are also streamed online), and local state-based current affairs programs would bring great value to communities which have lost local television services.

State-based news programs

12. The Bill could do more to support rural and regional Australia by mandating the return of state-based investigative journalism programs. Without state-based versions of the 7.30 Report, there is little ability for experienced journalists to probe issues with local and state politicians and vested interests.

Maintain regional and rural reporters

13. The Bill has sought to ensure that staff are maintained in regional and rural areas, but the emphasis could be on boosting more local programming (on air and online), rather than feeding into state and national programs. While there is always a need for the stories of regional and rural areas to be told to a metropolitan audience, there are many more stories that simply must be told by local reporters to local audiences.

Representative reporting

14. The Bill should mandate that the ABC truly represent all of regional and rural Australia in its programming, specifically multicultural and indigenous Australia. A case in point was the recent television program Backroads, where many of the town stories featured no indigenous people, even though they represented a significant proportion of the community.
15. The committee could look to create a greater diversity of voices for Australians living in regional and remote areas, by recommending an extension of government funding to print and digital organisations (independent of the ABC) to replace ailing regional newspapers as is currently done in some parts of Europe.

Attachment:

I present the following stories to the committee from former students who were keen their views be heard. Many wrote to me from their new homes in regional and rural Australia asking for ABC services to be increased:

“I've recently moved back to my hometown of Portarlington, which is zoned rural/coastal and about 2 hours out of Melbourne. Down here, our main sources of local news are the local papers, but they are so understaffed that you'd be lucky to get 2-3 pages of local stories and the rest is filler from metro coverage or real estate ads (though newspaper coverage is a conversation for another day!) Our closest ABC hub is Geelong, approximately 40 minutes away. As you can imagine [for the two journalists] covering a really large area means stories from our region struggle to get air time and I've found local news (mostly online) coverage to focus mostly on metro Geelong and the Surf Coast (Portarlington is on the Bellarine Peninsula, and neighbours a number of large towns like Drysdale, Queenscliff, Leopold and St Leonards). One contact I spoke to last week, who works with a refugee and asylum seeker advocacy group, said she's been trying to get radio coverage of her work but is having no luck, and said it's very difficult to get in touch with the ABC in Geelong. Of course, that's the journo's prerogative and not everyone's story deserves the journo's time ... I just think it's symptomatic of the wider issue that local news in the area is struggling to be picked up despite residents (and local journos like myself) wanting more. The ABC needs more airtime for ABC regional radio, and part of that would be sending more journos to rural areas (for more than Landline and the Country Hour)”

The paucity of ABC reporters outside the major regional centres was noted by many young graduates:

“Out here in Shepp, but I've only seen an ABC reporter once at a job (in about eight months of living out here). I know there is a news reader but I think she is confined at the office, reading the bulletins. This is sad, it would be great to have a bigger regional (Goulburn Valley) presence on ABC (as there was in NW Tassie, when I was there).”

The difficulties in covering a town of almost 200,000 people (and another 100,000 in surrounding communities) by two Geelong reporters without a radio station are outlined in this article

<http://abcnewsgathering.tumblr.com/post/90021603236/geelong-bureau-a-year-of-telling-local-stories>

Another graduate from the digital generation spoke of the life saving value of ABC services for emergency situations:

“Could you please mention how pivotal the ABC is during bushfire coverage? Such a lifesaver during the recent Indigo Valley bushfires to family and friends, particularly when there's no internet”.

This submission acknowledges that the size of Australia does make it very difficult for any broadcaster to provide local news, although the issues in those hard to reach places are just as interesting and as important as the capital cities, as this former school friend noted:

“I now live 65 km from Kununurra, on a station, just off the Great Northern Highway. We have Satellite TV, and when it's working properly (i.e: when not affected by 'the elements') we receive every ABC radio station in Australia, plus every state ABC channel. This is fabulous, however, 'it's just not local'. The 'local' station broadcasts from Broome, approx. 1000 km from Kununurra. Kununurra does have a weekly paper and of course the ever increasing number of 'local Facebook' pages....am a bit dubious about the validity of 'news' on these pages, though!

Kununurra is an interesting town- one of the Service Stations is like a mini Heathrow airport at times, with people of every nationality passing through. Tourism is a major industry, so you may see backpackers, Grey Nomads, itinerant farm workers (also backpackers), miners who work at the Argyle Diamond Mine, a large indigenous community and 'regular folk'. The local airport is also impressive, with Virgin flying to Broome and Perth, with AirNorth flying to Darwin and Broome, plus fleets of small aircraft and helicopters.

I now tune in to a great local, commercial station operated by an Indigenous Corporation with fab music, local stories, language and culture. Regarding programmes, such as Landline and the Country Hour- yes these are also great, but I would love some 'real Australian Stories'. (Just like the national show with the same name). State Current Affairs would also be fabulous- WA actually has a more regional feel than QLD, regarding commercial news bulletins BUT would much prefer the ABC and less 'car crash' TV!”