

**Australian Broadcasting Corporation**

submission to the

**Regional Telecommunications Review 2011–12**

December 2011



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### **Introduction**

The ABC welcomes the 2011–12 Regional Telecommunications Review and the opportunity to provide observations about regional communications and telecommunications drawn from its extensive experience serving Australian regional communities.

As a cross-platform media organisation, the Corporation operates both in the traditional broadcasting arena and in the new world of online services. Its Radio Division has experience serving regional communities dating back to the ABC's establishment in 1932 and, in recent years, has developed new regional relationships through its online operation. The Corporation has demonstrated its broad and enduring commitment to regional Australia, and to improving understanding between urban and rural audiences.

More than any other traditional media player, the ABC has embraced online content delivery. It seeks to provide services to its audiences on the platforms and devices they adopt wherever possible. As a result the Corporation has developed a sophisticated understanding of the benefits and pitfalls of digital delivery for both media organisations and audiences.

The ABC engages online with many thousands of Australians every day and can testify to the phenomenal growth in levels of digital participation over the past decade. Its experience confirms the growing number of regional Australians who are skilled and active members of online communities. However, the Corporation's experience also indicates that there is still a very real and profound 'digital divide' in Australia.

In this submission, the ABC will confine its comments to the questions posed in the Issues Paper that relate to matters of which it has direct experience, as well as addressing some general matters of interest.

## ABC services in regional Australia

The ABC has a unique role as a local multiplatform broadcaster and publisher. Its Radio Division maintains a heavy investment in a network of 51 regional and nine metropolitan stations where staff are best able to understand to engage with local audiences and understand the issues of interest and relevance to them. At 34 of its regional offices, ABC Radio employs cross-media reporters to seek out interesting local stories for online publication and/or radio broadcast.

Throughout its many regional activities, ABC Radio balances three complementary aims: to provide local content for local audiences; to bring local audiences relevant content from the ABC's state, national and international services; and to share local experiences, concerns and ideas with the rest of the country and the world. The best local broadcasting rests on shared experience and understanding, and can most effectively reflect, inform and entertain communities from within.

This local commitment is further enhanced by the continuing work of ABC Radio's Rural Department, which employs more than 70 staff with a broad focus on life on the land. It not only produces the daily *Country Hour* programs on local radio in each state, *Bush Telegraph* (daily) and *Country Breakfast* (weekly) on Radio National and *Rural Reporter*, but also manages a sizeable portal, with up-to-date specialist rural news, market information and other special features.<sup>1</sup> This portal will be extensively redeveloped in early 2012.

ABC Radio supports its extensive broadcast operation with a massive online presence and maintains complementary sites for all radio programs, as well as 60 Local Radio station websites with a broader role in promoting community information and cohesion. The great majority of radio programs are available as online streams and more than 30 million MP3s are downloaded each year. The Division has also developed a range of well-performing apps.

The ABC Open project, which commenced in February 2010, has currently placed 45 producers around Australia to help regional audiences engage in participatory media (user-generated content or UGC), encourage digital literacy and help bridge the digital divide currently experienced by many Australians living outside capital cities.<sup>2</sup>

ABC Radio also provides opportunities for the voices of regional youth to be heard through its annual *Heywire* competition and national summit for regional youth,<sup>3</sup> and the *triple j Unearthed* music site, which attracts a significant contribution – higher than 30% – from young musicians living outside the urban centres.<sup>4</sup>

The Division also continues to increase its capacity to provide effective emergency broadcasting during times of natural disaster and other crises. Although emergencies can also affect city dwellers, it is most often the regions which suffer the greatest impact and in which ABC emergency broadcasting services are most needed.

The ABC also takes advantage of new technologies, wherever possible, to establish more agile means of covering local stories and encouraging local content production. To this end,

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<sup>1</sup> [www.abc.net.au/rural/](http://www.abc.net.au/rural/)

<sup>2</sup> [www.open.abc.net.au](http://www.open.abc.net.au)

<sup>3</sup> [www.abc.net.au/heywire](http://www.abc.net.au/heywire)

<sup>4</sup> [www.triplejunearthed.com](http://www.triplejunearthed.com)

producers are increasingly using smart phones and laptops for content creation and taking general advantage of improved connectivity.

## Responses to questions in the Issues Paper

We would like to draw attention to ABC Open in this submission, as it is a digital media initiative specifically directed at regional audiences. In the 2009 Budget, the Federal Government committed \$15.3 million over three years to engage regional audiences in participatory media (user generated content, or UGC) and encourage media literacy in regional Australia.

The ABC Open team of multimedia producers works with individuals and communities in regional Australia to provide support and assistance in digital storytelling, so that their stories can be shared with their communities and with all Australians.

Through ABC Open, 8 national and 13 regional multimedia projects have been completed, attracting over 4000 contributions from community groups, organisations and individuals in the regions. Additionally, in excess of 1000 workshops have been held by ABC Open across the country, teaching digital media skills to over 3600 individuals. ABC Open works to ensure that these stories from regional Australia are heard across the nation, with ABC Open projects featuring not only on the ABC Open website, but also on ABC Local Online, ABC Local Radio, Radio National, triple j, rage, Arts Online, Art Nation and ABC News 24. ABC Open projects are also distributed across social networks and other platforms including Facebook, Flickr, Youtube, Twitter, mobile phones and digital TV depending on relevance to platform and audience.

ABC Open also physically showcases work to the community – each ABC Open region has, for example, held local screenings and events to showcase the work of community contributors, helping engage regional Australians in digital media.

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| <p>1. How is the use of telecommunications services; and information and communication technology [ICT] evolving in different industry sectors and what is the impact of these changes in regional Australia?</p> |
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Within the media industry, telecommunications and ICT services are playing a significant role in reshaping the traditional landscape, not least because of the challenges that online and mobile delivery create for traditional media business models. In regional Australia, these changes have the strong potential to accelerate the shift by commercial media organisations (newspapers, television and radio) from locally-generated news and talk content to greater levels of syndicated material.

The ABC has maintained its commitment to regional broadcasting. The Corporation's Charter obligation to broadcast programs which contribute 'to a sense of national identity ... and reflect the cultural diversity [of] the Australian community' makes its continued presence in regional Australia axiomatic. The ABC notes however that maintaining an extensive regional presence is expensive, as it entails running a significant number of offices and studios around the country, as well as the costs of long-distance coordination and supervision.

The ABC also notes the impact that mobile devices, most notably smart phones, are having on media consumption. The Corporation has observed that regional audiences tend to be more 'mobile' than house- or desk-bound urban consumers and are much more likely browse on the move.

There are many implications of this trend, the most obvious of which is that mobile telecommunications networks will need to be very robust to cope with increasing demand. As the ABC has moved more and more of its services onto mobile platforms, it has witnessed a corresponding rise in the level of complaints it receives about poor coverage, blackspots and drop outs in regional areas, as well as slow upload and download speeds. While the Corporation clearly has no control over these matters, it is looking at ways to provide digital information that remains available 'offline' when connectivity is poor or unavailable. This is likely to involve the development of directories and other reference information that can be downloaded, maintained via updates and 'cached' for use when required. For example, ABC Radio is in the process of developing a local emergency app that would provide vital information in times of crisis, whether connectivity was maintained or not. The Corporation believes this approach could be used effectively by other agencies at all levels of government.

Although it is another matter beyond its control, the ABC also receives a lot of comment about the cost of mobile services. As a public broadcaster, the Corporation is aware that online access for its audiences comes via commercial internet service providers, and that the cost of plans and the quality of service can be very varied, especially in remote and regional Australia. It is always conscious of the full range of users, not all of whom can access high-speed services. The ABC supports initiatives which will improve service and drive down costs for all consumers. It is also very aware of the need to ensure that information services for regional communities remain accessible on portable platforms, optimising websites for mobile browsing and providing high-quality free apps for portable device users.

5. What are some examples of what you want to happen to encourage greater participation in the digital economy by people living and working in regional Australia?
6. What are the main barriers to regional communities increasing their use of information and communications technologies and do you have any ideas for ways in which regional communities could progressively overcome these barriers?

The ABC has considered questions 5 and 6 together as digital literacy is fundamental to issues raised in both questions. As a matter of direct observation, regional audiences tend to have lower levels of digital skills and confidence, and this is fuelled by lower rates of access to equipment. ABC Radio cross-platform reporters and ABC Open producers travel into many communities where is very little or no digital technology available. They have found while schools and libraries may have computers which allow access to the internet (for children and seniors respectively), they are not always in sufficient numbers or with sufficient processing power or accessories (such as cameras) to allow for truly engaged participation. The online experience in these situations is a very passive one, which doesn't build the increasingly necessary capacity for digital content creation and participation. As described below, this has some particular implications for young people.

In the course of redeveloping the ABC's Rural portal,<sup>5</sup> the Corporation commissioned research which indicated that true digital participation should be a very active experience, not just the passive receipt of information from others. Building on its experience with 'self-help' gardening sites, where participants provide advice to their fellow locals, the ABC will be adding features to the Rural portal that encourage Australian audiences to connect with each other, such as remote mentoring for the sharing of farming and other relevant skills. In this way, it will create a trusted site that not only provides useful information, but increases online skills and confidence through audience participation.

More explicitly, and in response to audience demand, the new rural portal will also include educative features such as 'smart phones for dummies' pages and other online tutorials. These will complement existing initiatives, such as the ABC's *Technology Explained* site<sup>6</sup> and the recently launched ABC Open *Summer School*, which is aimed at sharing basic information and skills in the area of digital literacy with a broad regional audience.<sup>7</sup> *Summer School* will include workshops across the country covering topics such as introductions to social media and wikis, using RSS feeds, making sense of broadband plans, streaming versus downloading, photo sharing, using smart phones to record sound, basic stop-motion animation and online etiquette.

The ABC considers that increasing digital literacy into the future—especially in fostering culture change around participation and interaction—is critically important, hence its investment in this area. The Corporation recognises that the gaps between communities, largely, though not exclusively, on geographical grounds, are acute and should be addressed. The ABC strongly supports Genevieve Bell's description, cited in the Issues Paper (p.12), of the need for digital literacy programs that are lifelong and teach both basic skills and critical thinking.

7. Do you have ideas for ways in which high-speed broadband could enhance the delivery of education and healthcare outcomes in regional communities?

On 15 December 2011, the Federal Government announced funding for a new online education portal to be created by the ABC and Education Services Australia (ESA). The portal will provide students with access to contemporary and archival content linked to the Australian Curriculum, as well as self-directed interactive learning activities using games, video, reading material and quizzes.<sup>8</sup> The portal will be accessible to all Australian students, but will be most effective when accessed using a high-speed internet connection of the kind provided by the National Broadband Network (NBN). The portal will launch in the second half of 2012.

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<sup>5</sup> [www.abc.net.au/rural/](http://www.abc.net.au/rural/)

<sup>6</sup> [www.abc.net.au/technology/techexplained/](http://www.abc.net.au/technology/techexplained/)

<sup>7</sup> [open.abc.net.au/projects/summer-school-83wy3bz](http://open.abc.net.au/projects/summer-school-83wy3bz)

<sup>8</sup> The Hon. Peter Garrett MP, Minister for School Education, Early Childhood and Youth and Senator the Hon. Stephen Conroy, Minister for Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy. 'Enhanced learning as students access ABC's archive via new NBN education portal', Media Release, 15 December 2011.

9. Are there examples of the internet being used by Indigenous Australians in ways that take advantage of economic, social or cultural opportunities?
10. What further initiatives should the committee consider to improve awareness within Indigenous communities of the opportunities provided by improved broadband services?
11. What recommendations do you have for remote communities to take advantage of the progressive increase in availability of high-speed broadband?
12. What more could be done to improve digital literacy amongst Indigenous Australians and within Indigenous communities?

The issues already described above apply even more strongly to Indigenous communities. For example, Indigenous schoolchildren are even more dependent than others on school-based computing, as they are more likely to live in communities where there is no private access to the internet. The 2010 *Heywire* summit provided examples of Indigenous youths wanting to share videos of themselves performing traditional dances with peers in other parts of the country and being unable to do so.

The enthusiastic response to the Indigenous *DreamBox* project run by ABC Open is testimony to the ability and desire of Indigenous communities to be part of the digital world.<sup>9</sup> The *DreamBox* producers will report on all they have learned from the experience at the conclusion of the work in March 2012.

16. Are there any significant consumer issues specific to rural and remote communities that you consider are not being addressed?

The ABC has already noted the issues of delivery and cost of online services, which are respectively worse and more expensive in regional Australia, while that both are anticipated to improve with the rollout of the NBN in coming years.

The Corporation also believes that rural and remote communities suffer particularly from the increasing dearth of online (and other) content relevant to their specific, local needs and will maintain its deep commitment to generating content not only for, but by regional audiences.

20. How can education and awareness of the risks of using mobile devices, such as smart phones, be improved for consumers in regional areas?

The ABC is aware that some users may be unaware of online privacy concerns and its sites link through to a page setting out a range of privacy issues and advising users on how best to protect themselves.<sup>10</sup> Many of these principles are broadly application to smart-phone use. The Corporation also works hard to ensure that ABC online communities provide an open and welcoming environment for all users. Many sites have specific community guidelines to influence behaviour and are moderated closely.<sup>11</sup> The ABC is also very careful not to infringe

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<sup>9</sup> [open.abc.net.au/projects/dreambox-41gz2pv](http://open.abc.net.au/projects/dreambox-41gz2pv)

<sup>10</sup> [www.abc.net.au/privacy.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/privacy.htm)

<sup>11</sup> E.g., [open.abc.net.au/about/community-guidelines](http://open.abc.net.au/about/community-guidelines).

the intellectual property rights of those who upload creative content to its sites, and has developed appropriate terms and conditions.<sup>12</sup>

21. Are there any other issues relating to telecommunications services in regional Australia that you would like to bring to the committee's attention?

The ABC would like to raise two important, general issues of relevance to this Review: the absence of digital radio from regional Australia and the future of emergency broadcasting.

### **Digital Radio**

Government and commercial broadcasters commenced digital radio broadcasts in the five mainland capital cities (Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide and Perth) in July 2009, using the Digital Audio Broadcasting technology DAB+ in VHF Band III (Channel 9A). Additional trials are currently being conducted in Canberra and Darwin.

Digital radio gives listeners better sound, clearer reception, easier tuning (by station name), the ability to pause and rewind live radio, program-related and other information in text and pictures, and an electronic program guide which lets listeners search for and record programs much like digital television; importantly, it gives listeners more choice—more radio stations with new and different content.

The ABC has maintained a long-standing commitment to digital radio and has played a pivotal role in its development and introduction in Australia, including in the development of the DAB+ standard. The Corporation considers digital radio to be more than just the next generation of radio; it is an integral part of the emerging digital media landscape. Analog media is coming under increasing pressure from new technologies and platforms. Multi-channel digital broadcasting, internet streaming, peer-to-peer file sharing, media-on-demand, podcasting and an increasing range of mobile devices are breaking down traditional limitations of conventional radio and television, providing more convenient access and specialised content to increasingly fragmented and interactive audiences. Digital radio is far better placed to meet increased audience expectations and offer much more than the relatively passive listening experience of traditional analog radio.

Digital radio take-up in Australia, in terms of receiver sales and audience response, has far exceeded industry expectations. Almost half a million receivers have been sold, and it is expected that the millionth listener will come on board before the end of 2011.

The ABC is simulcasting its five analog services in the mainland state capital cities in digital. Additionally, ABC Radio is also providing six digital-only services: ABC Dig Music, ABC Jazz, ABC Country, ABC Grandstand Digital Sport, triple j Unearthed and ABC Extra (a 'pop-up' station for special events).<sup>13</sup>

The ABC is committed to all its services, including digital radio services, being available to all Australians, who own and pay for those services, regardless of where they live. Listeners outside the current digital radio footprint (over one-third of the population) are unable to

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<sup>12</sup> See, e.g., [open.abc.net.au/about/terms-conditions](http://open.abc.net.au/about/terms-conditions) and [pool.abc.net.au/content/set-and-edit-licence-your-work](http://pool.abc.net.au/content/set-and-edit-licence-your-work).

<sup>13</sup> [www.abc.net.au/radio/digital/](http://www.abc.net.au/radio/digital/)

access the superior sound and reception, attractive new features and new digital-only services that digital radio offers. The current inequity of access is such that a listener in Melbourne, for example, can now hear eleven ABC radio stations whereas a listener in Bendigo or Hobart can only listen to five. The proposition that regional listeners will only be able to receive fewer than half the ABC Radio services available to capital-city audiences is an unsustainable public policy objective.

In October 2010, Senator Conroy, Minister for Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy, announced that the Government had identified two channels (14 MHz) that will be made available to facilitate the rollout of digital radio to rural and regional Australia. These channels will be made available after analog TV switch-off, although probably not until 2014 at the earliest. The Minister also committed to working with industry to identify additional spectrum that may be utilised for DAB+ in regional Australia. However, the Government timetable for regional deployment of digital radio remains unclear. The ABC is keen to hear from Government information as to the timing, funding or preferred transmission models for regional digital radio, which may well impact the Corporation's capacity to provide equitable service in all centres.

The ABC would be pleased to talk further with the Review Panel on this critical matter of equitable access to media services in regional Australia.

### **Emergency Broadcasting**

The 'emergency broadcasting' role ABC Local Radio—both on-air and online—has been growing over many years. Not only are natural disasters becoming more frequent, but audiences, particularly those in regional areas, are increasingly turning to the ABC with the expectation of hearing reliable, rolling emergency coverage.

During a series of catastrophic events, most notably the Victorian Bushfires of 2009 and the Queensland floods and cyclones of 2011, ABC Local Radio has taken on greater responsibility for aiding community preparation and broadcasting more detailed warning and threat messages, moving into rolling emergency coverage once an event is truly underway and staying in 'recovery' mode for longer in order to provide post-disaster information and support to affected communities. The recent emergencies in Australia demonstrated a growing public demand for information beyond traditional radio and television broadcasts and it is expected that demand for universal access to timely and relevant information across all communication channels will increase. In line with consumer trends and expectations, the ABC has begun delivering emergency information to platforms including Facebook, Twitter, mobile phones and program-associated data on digital radio screens.

The ABC receives comprehensive feedback from its audiences and is aware of growing expectations around its performance in this emergency role. While the ABC is proud of the service provided to date, it is acutely aware of the responsibility brought with such a role. The Corporation has instigated a new level of training, year round planning and a significant commitment of resources. In recent years, staff (notably in Queensland, Victoria and Western Australia) have experienced a significantly increased workload. The financial costs have been considerable, impacting ABC Radio's ordinary operational budgets. The ABC is looking for the resources to place its emergency broadcasting on a sustainable footing. The ABC would be pleased to speak with the Review Panel on this critical matter for regional Australia.