



Australian Community Broadcasting Series

inclusion
participation
debate
community based media

Australian Community Broadcasting Series
ISSN 1445-971X
Vol. 1, No. 9
August 2001

Digital Divide

Elinor Rennie

Queensland University Of Technology.

The Australian Community Broadcasting Series is an e-journal hosted
at <http://www.cbonline.org.au>.

For further information, please contact info@cbonline.org.au.

**Where did the workers go when they needed a break?
How did the homeless make it into the living room?
Where do the disabled get access?
Who understands when you speak your own language?**

Community Television.

Many of us do not get the representation that we require or the information that we need on commercial or government television. Unless we work now to secure a fair share of the digital television spectrum for community use, there is a chance that many of us will not be visible when the new technology takes over.

The Australian government is currently determining how community television will be seen on our digital television sets. There is the very real possibility that the community will not be given adequate space or funding to partake in digital activities such as interactive television. Although digital television has been promoted as providing greater audience participation and diversity, the one space that already provides these qualities – and that is truly ‘two-way’ – may be switched off permanently.

Not only can we begin to develop new digital communities, we can use digital technology to support and encourage the communities of the ‘real world’.

Help us ensure that the digital future is a democratic future. Support community television.

Review 2001

The Australian Broadcasting Authority is currently reviewing the community television sector.

This is our last chance to ensure that community television is not left out of the ‘digital revolution’. It is expected that the outcomes of the current review into community television will determine the future of the sector and how it will be positioned in the digital television framework. In order to ensure that community television is granted a fair share of the digital spectrum we need all the help we can get – in the form of letters or submissions to the review, or simply by circulating information about the review to friends and colleagues.

All commercial and government free-to-air broadcasters (channels 7, 9, 10, ABC and SBS) have been granted free digital spectrum to develop interactive services and enhanced programming. They have also been required to maintain their analog transmission during the transition to digital broadcasting as people become interested in digital television and begin to purchase digital sets. Community television must be allowed to maintain its current analogue signal

(channel 31) until such a time as digital television is widely adopted by the public. We also require a guarantee that community television will be given digital spectrum and the capacity to develop new digital services such as interactive television in the future. (Link: digital television)

The current review into community television came about during the passage of the digital television legislation through the Senate. The Broadcasting Services Amendment (Digital Television and Datacasting) Bill 2000 was amended to include the following:

- (1) Before 1 January 2002, the Minister must cause to be conducted a review of the regulatory arrangements that should apply to the digital transmission of community television broadcasting services using spectrum in the broadcasting services bands and how access to spectrum should be provided free of charge.
- (2) The Minister must cause to be prepared a report of a review under subclause (1).
- (3) The Minister must cause copies of a report to be laid before each House of the Parliament within 15 sitting days of that House after the completion of the preparation of the report.

The Canadian government is currently holding a similar inquiry into the future of their community television services. So far the CRTC (Canadian Radio and Television Commission) have received 700 submissions and letters from the public and associated organisations. We can do better but here is very little time left and we need all the support we can get! Submissions to the review are due by July 20, 2001. Every input counts. Community Television

Why Save Community TV?

'I saw that men and women in these projects undergo compelling transformations in which established sociological, psychological, and even existential 'givens' are suddenly questioned. I could see how producing alternative media messages implies much more than simply challenging the mainstream... It implies having the opportunity to create one's own voice; it implies reconstructing the self-portrait of one's own community and one's own culture...'

- Clamencia Rodriguez, *Fissures in the Mediascape*, Hapton Press, Cresshill, 2001

Community television is where we broadcast our message, communicate to our peers, and it is where we see ourselves. Through community television we ensure media training opportunities, localism, the encouragement of innovation and program development, higher education delivery, and culturally diverse content at a local level. Sectoral diversity and diversity of ownership could also

be added as qualities that community television provides to the Australian broadcasting environment. Without community television, these qualities are poorly represented in the current digital television environment. Community television strengthens the groups, associations and networks that stimulate new and different ideas, cultures and viewpoints and that even work to increase our rights. This is more than media – it is the maintenance of our every day ties and associations and the workings of democracy.

Community television was introduced in Australia two decades after community radio. Cost and lack of spectrum were given as reasons to reject petitions from video access groups campaigning for community television as early as 1973. It was not until 1992 that a Parliamentary Inquiry into the future development of the sixth channel recommended that community TV be allowed to occupy the spectrum until a final decision was made on its use. This concession extended an already lengthy trial period for community television broadcasters, and allowed for the formation of consortiums and what was to become known as Channel 31 in five metropolitan and two regional areas. Six years later the sector was still waiting for permanent guaranteed spectrum. Although this never came, community television was granted permission to broadcast analogue until the introduction of digital (Jan 2001) after which time it was guaranteed free access to the datacasting spectrum needed to broadcast one standard definition television signal. However, in May '99, the Minister revoked the use of the sixth channel in areas other than those holding existing broadcast licences. Sixth channel spectrum not currently in use is being reserved for digital broadcasting.

Community television is currently on air in Melbourne, Brisbane, Perth, Sydney, Adelaide and Lismore. To become a community broadcaster in Australia, licensees are required to be non-profit associations, are restricted in the amount of sponsorship per minute they are allowed to broadcast and must prove their community representation upon application for a licence. Under trial, the community television stations operate on open narrowcasting licences – a commercial license that gives the non-profit groups some extra freedom with sponsorship and other fund-raising. Whether they will be able to maintain adequate funding under a community broadcasting licence is not yet known. Licensing issues will be addressed through the current review.

But despite funding problems, temporary licences and a lack of market research, there have been more than a few indications that there is an audience out there watching community television. Tamara Tonight, the drag-queen host of a Brisbane variety program received more votes than any other independent or small party candidate in the recent State elections, running in the same seat as Queensland's Premier. Melbourne's Access News (an alternative news and documentary program) often attracts crowds in the hundreds to its weekly program screenings, despite the fact that the program is broadcast at the same time. And when one volunteer surreptitiously stuck a ransom note to the Fishcam fishtank during Melbourne 31's annual subscriberthon ('pay-up or the fish get

flushed'), the phones rang with donations and calls from concerned citizens. So people are not just watching, they are actively engaging.

So what is the future for community television in Australia? The long-term answer to this question remains unclear. For the short term (current licences expire at the end of December this year), the existing services will struggle on as usual, wondering how much and what kind of a 'trial' they will be subjected to. For no-one yet knows whether the community television trial is the kind of trial by which a final judgement will decide the fate of the sector once and for all or whether it is a process of trial and error. The kind of trial that will allow the sector to one day get the formula (or formulae) right.

Digital Broadcasting

Digital television broadcasting began on January 1, 2001. Although digital television has been described as a 'participatory' technology, there is just one minority whose interests will be well-catered for through this new technology - those who desire and can afford cinema-like quality. The government has mandated at least twenty hours a week of High Definition Television broadcasting (HDTV) for commercial and government broadcasters to begin within two years of their first digital television transmission. At a large sum of up to \$20000 for a 90cm fully integrated High Definition television set, digital television is going to be a thing for the rich. Although the minority groups that watch community television may be denied their station under the current legislation, one niche audience will do very well indeed. Twenty hours a week, in fact, of all free-to-air programming on each commercial and government station will be devoted to only the very wealthy.

Digital television has been promoted as providing more channels (and hence viewing choices), due to the ability of the technology to 'compress' data and create more room within the broadcasting services bands. However, the reality is that in some areas there will be no spectrum left-over for community television services. Other free-to-air broadcasters are expected to 'triplecast' for the duration of the transition period - broadcasting in High Definition, Standard Definition (SDTV) and analogue - to ensure that people with high definition digital sets, standard definition digital sets, set-top boxes and the regular analogue sets will be able to receive free-to-air television. Broadcasters have been given a large quantity of spectrum in order to transmit these different signals, leaving very little space for new services of any kind. Furthermore, HDTV is a 'spectrum-hungry' technology, meaning that large portions of spectrum have been reserved for HDTV using up space that could be sold to new commercial services or reserved for the community sector. In this way, the interests of the existing free-to-air commercial stations are protected through the mandating High Definition Television (HDTV), as there is literally no room for competition. HDTV has not yet been mandated anywhere else in the world.

As it stands, all we can expect from digital television, is to be fed the same diet provided by the current three commercial and two government broadcasters but with some slightly different packaging. News Limited commented in a submission to the Senate hearings into digital television that “the face of broadcasting in 5 or 10 years will be the same as the face of broadcasting today. There will be no technical and commercial innovation. There will be no fresh voices. There will be no more diversity than there is today”. Strange words coming from a media empire, but true nonetheless.

What You Can Do

Write a letter, or send an email to the Department of Communications, Technology and the Arts.

Outline some or all of the following points:

- Community television must be given a fair share of the digital spectrum if we are to ensure diversity of ownership, views and values in the Australian media. Otherwise we are in danger of disenfranchising communities and individuals from the public forum of television.
- Community television must be allowed to broadcast in analog until the analog switch-off date (still to be determined by government). If community television is granted digital spectrum but no analogue simulcast it will face diminishing audiences until such a time as the public have converted to digital. As the community television audience consists of people from diverse age groups, language groups and economic classes, it is likely that those who benefit most from community television will not be able to receive it unless the analog signal is maintained. These are communities that are grossly under-represented in commercial, and often government, television.
- Digital television provides us with the opportunity to set-up adequate funding arrangements for community television. Community television has proved that it can survive under difficult circumstances, without public funding or permanent licences. A better resourced sector would mean that current services could flourish and new stations, particularly in regional areas, could develop. By imposing a levy on commercial broadcasters or datacasters to be paid to a community television fund, we could achieve this without draining public resources.
- Community television provides local content that is relevant to its audience, as it is produced **by and for** the people of that community. Not only does community media supply locally relevant programming, it educates people in media production and personal/cultural expression. By allowing regional and

metropolitan digital community television, we can ensure that the information economy reaches the entire population of Australia, hence avoiding the creation of technology 'hubs' only in the major cities.

- Community television should be granted an equal share of spectrum as that of other free-to-air broadcasters. By giving community television an adequate space within the Broadcasting Services Bands, not only will our communities benefit but our standard of digital television broadcasting at large will also improve. Community media has often pioneered uses of new technologies including the FM bands on radio and text services on television. The training in new technologies offered through community television groups will extend the television industry and act as a 'test-bed' for ideas that may be adopted by commercial and government broadcasters.
- Digital technology suits the needs and purpose of community television. Interactivity and information distribution have long been characteristics of community television. Current services such as the 'community billboards' could be put to better use through interactive programming and would enhance the quality and availability of local information for the public.
- Community television provides an affordable means for small businesses to promote their products through sponsorship. It is important that these business are given the opportunity to continue to utilise the television medium when digital becomes the prevalent technology.
- If your group, community, business or organisation has ever made use of community television (either through advertising, programming, by being featured on a community television program or even by gaining information from community television), outline the nature of this activity and how it has benefited you. Or, if you see potential to utilise community television in the future, let the government know before it is too late!

Copyright Elinor Rennie 2001.