

## Community broadcasting

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with a "longterm sustainable future".

Although protocols are yet to be decided, the Database is expected to be a valuable and versatile acquisition. In addition to its ability to generate a range of information for broadcasters and government policy makers, it is envisaged as a significant management and marketing tool and has been hailed by the Department of Communications and the Arts as a potential "launching pad for the marketing of community broadcasting".

***Together with advice that the community sector should spend the infrastructure funding "appropriately, efficiently and effectively", the government considers this investment an opportunity for community broadcasting to "shape its own destiny" and "establish a role in the new communications environment"***

Such a facility will be welcomed by those in government and the sector who believe that more accurate and verifiable data will help increase sponsorship opportunities. But others will see it as a catalyst for an even greater commercialisation of the community broadcasting sector.

Likely to be more controversial are plans regarding the future role of an upgraded ComRadSat. The government seems to view the satellite as a means of rationalising the growing number of aspirant broadcasting groups, suggesting that where possible such groups should merge or act as consortia and use a more sophisticated "'seamless' program service" as a substitute and supplement to

local programming. The CBAA has also proposed a new role for the satellite, suggesting ComRadSat be used as a way of reserving spectrum space for a community broadcasting licensee in areas where a local group is expected to materialise but is yet to emerge.

By means of a temporary licence allocated to local government, a community broadcasting service would be provided by ComRadSat. Once the local station becomes fully operative, the satellite service would revert from "program supplier" to "program augments". The encouragement for aspiring broadcasters to form consortia is also ominous given the government's concerns about the size of the sector and that the introduction of DRB requires a consortia of stations to share transmission infrastructure.

It could be construed as an irony that the same government facilitating the sector's growth is also seeking to ultimately make it self-sufficient. It was, however, a Coalition government-inspired amendment to the Broadcasting Services Act 1992 that introduced a Temporary Community Broadcasting Licence. This has simplified and quickened the process faced by aspirant groups in getting "to air" and eased the logjam created by the lack of such a provision in the original Act. As the Australian Broadcasting Authority planning process reaches its conclusion, more permanent community broadcasting licences are also being issued. But in recognising that the community sector could almost double in size, the government has indicated that it cannot maintain average per station support.

Neither does government consider the current funding model adequately flexible to support the technological and service changes being expected of the sector. Rather than continue the current practice of tagging the majority of

funding to the print handicapped, ethnic and Aboriginal sub-sectors, distributing the balance among the remaining generic stations, the suggestion is for "safety net" funding for the three designated groupings with the remainder to be made available for special projects, innovations and "start-up funding" for new stations. While there will be some support for this initiative, the CBAA has deemed it a controversial proposal, even though it acknowledges that current funding arrangements have long been a centre of tension.

Irrespective of the final funding formula, the government is only likely to continue funding the sector's basic requirements, leaving individual stations and the sector as a whole to generate whatever additional funding is required. This, in a climate where community broadcasters face:

rising costs as government utilities such as the National Transmission Authority become privatised and users are required to pay commercial rates;

more competition for sponsors as the number of commercial broadcasting and narrowcasting services rise; and

greater rivalry at the community level for the fundraising dollar.

With the sector keen to migrate to DRB and the Digital Radio Advisory Committee estimating each operator's new hardware transmission costs at anywhere between \$50,000 to \$150,000, funding pressures are likely to be accentuated. Both the government and the CBAA recognise that these developments have the potential to fragment a community broadcasting sector already contemplating an uncertain future.

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