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17th March, 2006.

Committee Secretary,
Standing Committee on Communications, Information Technology and the Arts,
House of Representatives
Parliament House
CANBERRA, ACT, 2600.

Dear Sir/Madam,

COMMUNITY BROADCASTING ENQUIRY

On behalf of Gippsland FM (3GCR), please find attached a submission to the above enquiry.

In considering this submission, it should be noted that this station has been in operation since 1977 and therefore welcomes the opportunity to provide input reflective of almost 30 years experience in the community radio sector.

This submission is set out in two parts – the first being a detailed overview of Gippsland FM and the latter part addressing the specific terms of reference of the enquiry. The paper is largely authored by myself as a participant in our station since its inception, in consultation with the current members of station management.

If you require any further information or clarification on the issues raised, please contact me via e-mail at ken_thompson@lymmco.com.au or at the above address or telephone numbers.

I look forward to the outcomes of this important enquiry for our sector.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Ken Thompson'.

Ken Thompson
Chairperson

Att.

STATION PROFILE

Gippsland FM (3GCR) is the community radio station based in the central Gippsland/Latrobe Valley area. The station is situated in Morwell and like other community radio stations around the country, Gippsland FM is a non-profit volunteer-run organisation which aims to provide an alternative radio service for the local community, complementing and supplementing the national and commercial radio networks. The station commenced broadcasting in 1977.

The official station call-sign is 3GCR-FM, however the station has been using the name “GIPPSLAND FM” for the past twenty-five years or more. The station is owned and operated by the Gippsland Community Radio Society Co-operative Limited. Membership is open to all members of the community - individuals or groups - who can own shares (and voting rights) in this co-operative. Discount or concession rates apply for individuals who are students, unemployed or pensioners.

Management

Members of the Gippsland Community Radio Society Co-operative Limited elect the Board of Directors which is comprised of seven directors elected for two year terms on an annual rotation (four one year, three the next). Board roles include Chairperson, Secretary, Treasurer, Program Co-Ordinator, Technical Co-ordinator, Marketing, etc. All Board meetings are open to all members and any other interested persons.

Sub-committees also operate to assist the Board and provide a vehicle for participation in station policy development and decision-making. These are responsible to the Board for specific areas of station management and include the Program Committee, Marketing Committee and the Technical Support Group.

A Community Advisory Committee is also now being established to ensure that the station has enhanced accountability to the community it serves. The role of this committee is to:

- represent the community at large (i.e. not just the current audience but the potential audience),
- assist in identifying community needs that Gippsland FM could cater for, and
- act as a reference point for evolving station objectives and aspirations.

Such a committee would operate at “arms length” from the station and be drawn from various sectors of the community; its participants would not be members of the station. At a practical level the committee will:

- Provide commentary on station business plans and objectives,
- Identify needs in the local community which are not being met by current media,
- Identify areas where sectors of the community are under-represented in the media,
- Identify areas where the station could offer support to the skills development, self-esteem or general well-being of community groups or individuals, and
- Identify areas where the current station service could be improved to meet community needs.

This is a key piece of governance infrastructure that will assist the station in remaining accountable to the community and reduce the risks of station management being hostage to the membership or sectors within it. A robust linkage to the community will ensure independent assessment of community needs and the role of the station in meeting those needs.

Programming Policy

Gippsland FM aims to provide a broad range of programming to meet the needs of most sectors of the local community. In other words, Gippsland FM is the station for “all the people some of the time” – as opposed to say commercial radio which broadcasts to a specific audience sector all of the time. Program categories presented include, Ethnic, Current Affairs, Sport, Community Access, Religious, Youth, along with a full spectrum of musical styles. The station also presents the independent news service produced by the community broadcasting network via satellite (ComRadSat).

GIPPSLAND FM currently provides a wide range of programs including:

- nine ethnic language programs,
- current affairs and hourly news/weather services,
- youth and community access programming,
- local sport,
- religious, arts and literature, and
- a comprehensive range of music from specialist music of all styles to the latest chart favourites.

Programs run continuously – 24 hours a day, 7 days a week – in true stereo high fidelity sound.

The programming policy of Gippsland FM discriminates in favour of local people and programs and the station has an affirmative action policy towards the encouragement of female participation and the removal of prejudice of all forms.

Current Environment

Over its (almost) thirty year history, Gippsland FM has suffered from a lack of stability in its management, financial performance and volunteer effort required to maintain all systems operating.

It is not a coincidence that the station’s fortunes have suffered along with those of the community it serves. The Latrobe Region has undergone the most significant industry restructuring in Australia and was acknowledged as the region most in need of government assistance. With the loss of more than 20,000 jobs in the region – the economic and social impact has been significant and this was reflected in the fortunes of Gippsland FM.

However, the past five years at Gippsland FM have seen a significant improvement in the management and governance of the station and financial performance. A recent independent audience survey has also proven that the station still is regarded as providing a valuable contribution to the local community with the retention of a significant listening audience (around 30,000 listeners each week).

The recent relocation of the station to new premises in Morwell has also been significant in not only bringing people together to achieve what was a challenging project (financially and logistically) but also in providing new facilities which allowed the station to function in a much more efficient manner. The recent establishment of a new transmitter has also been fundamental in ensuring quality reception in the listening area and the station is currently completing an upgrade to its studio operating panels after more than 20 years use of the previous mixing desks.

Currently the station has around 80 volunteers who present programs each week and assist in other functions. Local people deliver programs on a daily basis from 6.00am to midnight – with overnight services provided from the community radio satellite. In the past, volunteer numbers have been as high as 100 – however renewed interest in broadcasting has been observed in the last couple of years. There is no paid staff at the station.

A History of Service

Since 1977, Gippsland FM has provided a wide range of programs to a diverse range of audiences in the local region. The more significant and enduring aspects of these elements are as follows:

- Ethnic broadcasting – the station has delivered up to 14 different ethnic programs on a long term basis; currently 9 ethnic programs are provided each week and these programs are highly valued by their respective ethnic communities;
- Youth access – has remained a feature of our broadcasting with a local schools program running for many years and a daily prime time-slot designated for youth programs still in operation after 25 years;
- Indigenous programming by local people has also been a feature of the station's broadcasts over the past 20 years;
- Sporting involvement has also been on-going for the past 20 years – with Gippsland FM being the only station willing to provide live coverage of local football and other sporting events. The station also covered the National Soccer League (when Morwell was a participant) – after some years, this was poached by the local commercial radio station, which dropped it soon after;
- Support for local musicians has also been a major feature of our broadcasts – and live performances have been a part of that. The local music industry has often returned the favour by assisting the station when in need of fund-raising support;
- Local current affairs – the station has had a number of programs which cover various aspects of current affairs; most of these programs have run for many years and are much valued by the local community. In particular, a key attribute is the ability to deliver in-depth discussions on issues – rather than the short “grabs” that are a feature of the other media.

In addition to these key areas, it should be noted that the station has a strong relationship with the local council – who are featured weekly in one of our current affairs programs. In recent times, the station has ceased viewing itself as a “charity” requiring support and assisted a number of other community organisations – either through direct financial contribution or in-kind support where such organisations can still derive financial benefit. Examples of this include a donation of over \$2,500 towards the local cancer care ward at the Latrobe Regional Hospital (a donation that would have been deemed unachievable some years ago) and in-kind support to local kindergartens, Relay for Life cancer appeal and other similar events.

Current Business Plan

The station is now in a consolidation phase with excellent facilities now available – however whilst the physical infrastructure is in good shape, the human infrastructure is somewhat vulnerable with a heavy reliance on volunteer effort. The financial situation for Gippsland FM is such that it can operate viably as a voluntary organisation, however the value of this station for the local community would be considerably enhanced if it was able to fund a paid manager and a couple of part-time staff. With such resources the station could play a more significant role in bringing the local community together, assisting and shaping social development and building the self-esteem and potential of groups and individuals to play a greater part in the development of this region and the nation.

The key components of the current business plan are -

Our Vision

To provide a media outlet that supports and meets the needs of, and is valued by, the community.

Our Mission

- To view the community as the primary station shareholder
- To be relevant to the community we serve
- To reflect and support community aspirations
- To act as a catalyst for community self worth
- To diversify our activities
- To have a quality administration
- To operate the station in a financially viable manner
- To have diverse income streams
- To supplement and enhance current technology

RESPONSE TO ENQUIRY TERMS OF REFERENCE

Introduction

For a regional community such as the Latrobe Valley, the relative importance of a properly functioning community radio station is far greater today than in previous times of local prosperity. In the past fifteen years, this region has undergone massive economic and social change – primarily due to its reliance on the electricity industry and the restructuring of that sector which has occurred. This resulted in significant unemployment and associated social problems. As such, community radio has become a voice where the real social issues affecting the local community have been promoted and debated without the hand of media ownership or Government control being manifest. In addition, Gippsland FM has been a focal point for many of those who have been alienated by the industry reform process.

The station therefore plays a unique role in linking the community together and providing support where other media forms simply exploit opportunities available to them. Gippsland FM has and continues to provide opportunities for local people to learn new skills, build self-esteem and potential for new directions in life. The evidence of this is in the significant number of station personnel involved today who are not in formal employment. It should also be noted that recent recruiting campaigns have been “over subscribed” with significant numbers desirous of participating in the station.

The sector is also a training ground for national and commercial broadcasters. Whilst this may be recognised informally, there is no national recognition for the important role played by community media in developing the current and next generation of journalists for the electronic media. From its own modest position, Gippsland FM has produced many individuals who have gone on to manage or participate in broadcasting activities with the ABC or commercial interests in Australia and overseas. For a relatively small regional station, this reflects positively on Gippsland FM and suggests that small regional stations should not be under-estimated in terms of their contribution to external needs.

For a station that has been in operation for almost thirty years, the on-going challenge for Gippsland FM has been to produce adequate financial resources to not only maintain the organisation but deliver the necessary investment in equipment. Gippsland FM could be considered as now achieving a reasonable level of operation in both these areas – although it could always be argued that our programming quality would be considerably enhanced had more financial support been available and directed to programming issues. However, our ethnic programs have received such support in this regard and the legacy of these programs is testament to that support. Whilst there are numerous challenges which exist for our sector and its respective participants, at a macro level our considered view is that two key challenges remain for us and the community media sector. These are:

- On-going financial viability, and
- Technological change (which is in reality impacted by financial capabilities).

The Scope And Role Of Community Broadcasting

In our view, the scope and role of community broadcasting generally concurs with the original ideals established for the sector. These were to:

1. to make broadcasting accessible to individuals and sections of the community seeking access to broadcasting facilities, particularly those who could not obtain access to other media
2. to expand meaningful programming choices to satisfy a wide diversity of needs and interests of listeners, and
3. to enable community organisations to own, operate and control their own independent broadcasting services, thereby diversifying control of the media.

Our station has certainly maintained a robust adherence to these values and attempted to ensure a balance between the needs of the community (as audience) and the needs of groups and individuals who wish to broadcast. Since 1977, Gippsland FM has seen participation by almost 1000 regular presenters not including probably an even greater number of guests and program related participants. Our independent audience surveys have shown a consistent and significant audience size over the past 15 years (prior to then the station could not afford the cost of such surveys – which even today is a factor in just how often such surveys are undertaken).

However, whilst maintaining these three necessary elements noted above, the future role of community broadcasters may need to accommodate a more refined balance between globalism (occurring through technological developments) and localism – whereby the specific local needs are also met. Our view is that community broadcasting will only remain relevant to its own community if it gets that balance right. The difficulty is in identifying what that position might be and how it changes over time. Community stations will therefore require resources or services to assist them in establishing an objective assessment of community needs.

Another emerging role for community broadcasters is the ability to harness and nurture community aspirations in order to improve the quality of life of respective communities. This role is not well understood by many community broadcasters and communities at large. However, in a world where there is no shortage of information – it will be important that community broadcasters can develop the credibility to facilitate improvements in areas such as:

- Social equity and harmony
- Race relations and prejudice
- Shared understanding of important community issues
- Economic opportunities
- Education and skills development.

It should be noted here that the community radio sector pioneered the development of FM stereo broadcasting in Australia. This is a risk the commercial sector would not take – and in 1977 when Gippsland FM (or 3GCRFM as we were then known) commenced broadcasting, it suffered from a range of problems relating to this:

- Other local stations were still on the AM band
- Many makes of motor vehicles still only had AM radio
- Listeners did not appreciate that FM radio required a “TV-like” antenna
- Listeners had to buy or wait until they procured an FM radio at home, etc.

This served to retard momentum for our sector and our station – particularly in a rural community. Whether or not history will repeat itself in regard to the next step change is arguable – given the costs of new technology; however the role of community broadcasters in pioneering into new frontiers should not be lost when considering the next generation of change.

In summary, the potential for community broadcasting has not been fully recognised or realised by Government or the sector itself.

Content and Programming Reflecting Australian Character

In our view the very essence of community radio is a reflection of the Australian character and its cultural diversity. In fact, we would argue that it is more representative of these criteria than any other sector of the media. Why? Because in general community broadcasters simply involve the community at a grass roots level; they tell it 'how it really is' without fear or favour and community broadcasters are not afraid to address the issues that the other sectors will not.

At Gippsland FM, our station has tried to meet a wide range of diverse community needs and in the process has delivered long running programs in the following areas:

- Arts and culture
- Business and economic development
- Children, Youth, Aged, Middle-Aged,
- Comedy
- Community access – sporting, guides/scouts, Rotary, local council, dance club,
- Community health
- Current affairs – local, national and international
- Disability issues
- Ethnic
- Gardening
- Gay And Lesbian
- Indigenous
- Leadership
- Literature
- Local eisteddfods
- Local history,
- Local news
- Local schools
- Music of every conceivable genre
- Occupational health and safety
- Radio drama
- Religious
- Sport
- Trade Unions

As previously noted, Gippsland FM has a warm and co-operative relationship with the local music industry. This has been an enduring relationship built over many years of support for the local industry by our station. Notably, Gippsland FM would be the only station in the region to consistently provide opportunities for local musicians to perform live to air – either from our studios or via outside broadcasts from local venues.

Our station objective is to deliver 30% Australian content in music programs and of course promote local artists. The station has also been a keen supporter of local festivals and has regularly presented live broadcasts from such events. We have also broadcast significant national issues when events have been held locally; examples of this include the broadcast of Prime Minister John Howard's address to a huge crowd at the Sale Football Ground (during the height of the guns debate in the mid-1990's) and we presented the public debate held on the republic issue – moderated by Sir Ninian Stephen and featuring Dame Leonie Kramer and Professor Donald Horn in front of an audience of some 500 local people. Many other similar examples have occurred over our history.

All of these program areas have been delivered by local people; as such reflective of the issues as perceived in the local community and inherently reflective of the Australian character and diversity.

Technological Opportunities

As observed earlier, the technological opportunities for community broadcasters may appear to be limitless – however the reality is that the boundaries are defined by the financial resources that the community sector has available to it.

In the event that funds are to be allocated to the sector, it may be prudent to spend these where the benefit may be maximised. For broadcasting – this might mean areas where potential audiences are greatest and therefore regional areas would miss out on the opportunities to develop into new areas of program delivery. It would therefore seem that an equitable process will be required to ensure that regional communities are not disadvantaged.

Clearly, the community broadcasting sector is the most diverse and representative media provider in the nation. In light of the Federal Government's recent announcements regarding digital technology and media ownership, the outcomes may produce a reduction in owners and more delivery platforms to disseminate centrally produced content; this will compromise real diversity unless community broadcasting is provided with real opportunities that it can embrace.

Opportunities and Threats

In some respects these are already covered in the foregoing material. However, to articulate these further, our view is that the opportunities for community broadcasters can be summarised as follows:

- Potential to explore new roles for community broadcasters within their respective communities,
- Recognition for the sector as a major training provider for electronic media journalists and broadcasters and as a general provider of skills for others,
- Potential to exploit some of the emerging technologies that are affordable for the sector.

In our view the threats for community broadcasters would include:

- The lack of ability to move quickly if there was a major shift in the mode of program delivery to local audiences,
- Lack of financial resources to adequately provide acceptable programs or maintain the equipment appropriate to meeting the needs of the community,
- A lack of faith from the political levels of Government that community broadcasting may not continue to deliver value to the Australian people, and
- Further regulatory changes which might impede the ability of the sector to attract funds or other resources to maintain or develop its services.

In our case, with more funds available, Gippsland FM would be able to provide greater human infrastructure in order to:

- Interact better with the local community,
- Facilitate and train local people better,
- Enhance linkages between the station and community groups, and
- Better identify and meet the needs of the local community.

Closing Remarks

The community broadcasting sector is still emerging in many areas and has not fully reached its potential; its role can transcend the media sector and become more to different communities depending on their aspirations and community acceptance. It is therefore important that Government does not restrict its vision for community broadcasters as just another media outlet.

Funding options for the future development of the sector need to be addressed. Creative solutions can be produced for further consideration and Gippsland FM would urge this enquiry to consider the matter in some detail or even facilitate more consultation on this area; it is a fundamental concern given the technological challenges and the continuing growth in number of community broadcasters.

The training and development provided by community broadcasters for the paid sectors of the media needs to be recognised in a tangible way. Currently, this sector is providing the training for the paid media sectors which simply reap the benefits. A more appropriate transfer of wealth from those who benefit without contributing needs to be conceived.

The ability of the community sector to continually survey audiences and understand the needs of respective communities is constrained by financial considerations. Without some sort of feedback mechanism community broadcasters can not be sure that they are meeting these needs. Whilst this might simply be considered a financial issue, there may be other mechanisms which might assist the sector in capturing the “market intelligence” that it ought to possess. Certainly, the three tiers of Government in Australia would collectively understand some of these issues – the trick is in transferring such data to our sector.

Gippsland FM expresses its appreciation for the opportunity to present its views. Our journey over the past thirty years has been at times tumultuous – but always rewarding. We look forward to the results of this enquiry and wish the committee well in its deliberations.