

Community radio in regional & rural Australia

About community broadcasting

Community broadcasting is Australia's largest independent media sector, a key pillar in the Australian media landscape, and recognised internationally as one of the most successful examples of grassroots media.

Australia's first community radio station was licensed in 1972 and the sector has developed rapidly over its 40 year history. The number of permanently licensed stations has grown by over 75% in the last decade, with 66% of the 450+ community radio stations operating in regional and rural areas.

Now, more than 5 million people tune in to not-for-profit, community-owned and operated radio services across the country each week.¹

Community radio stations play an important role in catering to the needs of, and providing a voice for, communities that aren't adequately serviced by other broadcasting sectors. This includes Indigenous, ethnic and multicultural, educational, community access, religious and faith-based, Radio Reading Network for people with a print disability, youth and seniors', LGTBIQ, specialist music and arts content.

In metro areas there is a greater diversity of specialist stations; in regional and rural communities community radio stations are more likely to provide this same diversity within a generalist station through diversity of programming. There is however also a strong representation of Indigenous and faith-based stations in regional areas.

The national community radio audience listens to services that contribute to and reflect Australia's open society strong democracy and vibrant culture by:

- Sharing a diverse range of viewpoints that enrich the social and cultural fabric of Australian society and contribute to public interest outcomes
- Promoting the identities of local communities and contribute to social inclusion
- Providing opportunities for participation in free-to-air public broadcasting and content production
- Contributing to media diversity
- Generating a high level of local content
- Providing a unique range of services and programs

The Community Broadcasting Association of Australia (CBAA) champions community broadcasting by providing services that build stations' capability and create a healthy environment for the sector to thrive.

¹ <https://www.cbaa.org.au/broadcasters/get-data-national-listener-survey-station-census/national-listener-survey-fact-sheets>

Community radio stations are Australia's largest network of facilities for broadcasting, multimedia content and live production in rural and regional areas.

These 180 congruous, yet autonomous, fully licenced stations throughout rural and regional areas, plus a number of stations operating on Temporary Community Broadcasting Licences, are hubs of collaborative content production and sites of social and cultural engagement within local communities. Often the only local producers of cultural content, news, community information for broadcast, they can be first first-and-only port of call for community leaders to engage with their community on air.

Community radio facilities are more widely dispersed and locally-focused than government and commercial equivalents and, with strategic support, offer the greatest opportunity for development and increased social return.

Increasingly, many 'regional' services offered by commercial or national broadcasters are produced remotely from metropolitan facilities, and in response to recent funding cuts national broadcasters have indicated a likelihood of further retreat from local production. Much 'regional' broadcasting presence is limited to marketing and sales departments. In contrast, community radio is locally produced, presented and controlled.

Facilities include production and back-up studios, in addition to primary broadcast studios and studios for training. Because of the lumpy investment required to establish broadcasting facilities, there is significant latent capacity in community broadcasting facilities that could be further used to deliver benefit to local communities given smart investment by government.

Community radio stations in regional and rural areas are already doing a lot with limited financial, technological and human resources:²

- Regional and remote community radio stations report a median annual income of less than \$50,000 per year.
- Income is highly variable amongst stations, with 11% reporting an income of less than \$15,000 per year. These stations still produce an average of 100 hours of local content per week and 180 minutes of community information.
- 42% of stations do not have paid staff. Those that do have an average of 2.5 FTE staff.
- On average, stations rely on the efforts of 9FTE volunteers per station (an average of 34.6 volunteers per station in total).
- 5 stations reported have no Internet access. These stations still produce an average of 115 hours of local content per week.

² Figures based on analysis of the Community Broadcasting Station Census 2013 <https://www.cbaa.org.au/broadcasters/get-data-national-listener-survey-station-census/station-census>

Regional and rural stations deliver local news, music and special interest media content to their communities.

79% of Australians in regional and remote areas typically listen to radio each week, while 25% listen to community radio. 1 in 5 community radio listeners in these areas do not listen to other commercial or government radio services.³

The main reasons that listeners tune in include:

- Local information and local news (63%)
- Local voices and personalities (32%)
- To hear an independent voice not owned by big business or government (31%)
- Because locals can participate in radio production if desired (31%)
- To hear Australian music and support local artists (29%).

Research shows that community radio successfully meets these needs in regional and rural Australia:

- 1/3 of surveyed rural and regional stations reported to be the only radio broadcaster producing local programming in their area.⁴
- A median of 142 hours of locally produced content is broadcast each week. This compares favourably to minimum required hours of local content for commercial radio stations of three hours per business day / 30 minutes for small licence areas).
- Stations broadcast an average of 10 hours of news content and 6 hours of current affairs content per week.
- 30% of stations produce news in-house, an average of 3.3 hours per week.
- Some stations use multiple services to meet the needs of their communities, including community radio services (National Radio News, National Indigenous Radio Service), the ABC and commercial news services (local, national and international).
- Stations broadcast, on average, 279 minutes of community information on behalf of 39 individuals or organisations per week. While not part of formal news services, such community information is part of the news offering for local communities.
- Across Australia, 39% of music broadcast on community radio is Australian.
- 124 hours of music programming goes to air each week on regional and rural stations, including 49 hours of Australian music programming. This is more than metropolitan and suburban community radio stations.
- 57.5 hours of live performances by Australian musicians per year recorded by stations on average. That's around 10,000 hours of recorded performances of local artists by regional and rural broadcasters per year.
- Stations produce special interest media that the commercial market does not. This includes averages of 4.2 hours of Indigenous content, 15.8 hours of religious content and 5 hours of content for people with a print disability each week.

Community broadcasters produce local news, current affairs and community information

³ <https://www.cbaa.org.au/sites/default/files/media/McNair%20Fact%20Sheet%20-%20Australia%20-%202015%20-%20Wave%20%232.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.cbaa.org.au/broadcasters/get-data-national-listener-survey-station-census/station-census>

National Radio News (NRN) is a partnership between the CBAA and Charles Sturt University. NRN produces 82 news bulletins per week, and distributed to around 80 stations nationally, weighted heavily towards regional stations, through the CRN distribution service.

National Indigenous Radio Services (NIRS) operates a national program distribution service of content produced by First Nations broadcasters, including current affairs and regional news, as well as a National Indigenous News Service of news bulletins and a weekly news digest.

Many community radio stations produce current affairs or magazine format programming, either on general news or issue specific programming. The CRN and NIRS services syndicate many of these programs to distribute quality content to stations with-out the resources to produce in-house.

Increasingly, community radio stations are seeking partnerships and resource sharing to produce more locally produced news. These partnerships will become increasingly important if reforms to media ownership lead to further retreat of commercial broadcasters producing content in local communities.

Digitisation

The current agenda to pursue and incentivise regional roll-out of digital radio services is a continuation of the process of digitising broadcasting in Australia, and is also apparent globally.⁵

In this context, it is critically important that the policy principle of community broadcasters having affordable access to broadcasting spectrum be maintained, regardless of the technology (and likely across multiple technologies in the case of regional and rural communities). A set of primary services must be available in digital form, on a free-to-air basis.

Action contrary to this principle will render community broadcasting to an analogue future in a digital world, and the current social benefit of community broadcasting infrastructure, facilitated by the many volunteers and staff in the sector, will be lost.

The CBAA is involved in the Digital Radio Planning Committee for Regional Australia, chaired by the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA). The CBAA encourages the members of this Committee to consider the work of the Digital Radio Planning Committee for Regional Australia in your deliberations.

Community radio contribution to broadcasting, online content and live production to rural and regional Australia

Community radio is Australia's largest independent media sector, and the outline above demonstrates a strong presence (both physically and on-air) in regional Australia. Community radio stations provide programming reflecting the diversity of their communities and contribute to and reflect an Australia that is an open society, a strong democracy and a vibrant culture.

Within our sector and across broadcasting, the CBAA is continuously grappling with the regulatory, planning, infrastructure and social questions that the Committee is exploring in this Inquiry. By definition (if not by regulatory requirement) the majority of our stations' direct interests is the importance of broadcasting, multimedia production and live production to rural and regional communities across Australia.

As the peak body for the sector, and an active participant in research, policy and planning in broadcasting reform, the CBAA is well placed to provide further advice to the committee.

We offer our further assistance and look forward to the opportunity to speak to the Committee during hearings.

⁵ <https://www.cbaa.org.au/sites/default/files/media/CBAA%202014%20Digital%20Radio%20Submission.pdf>