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Independent review of Australia's COVID-19 response

The Community Broadcasting Association of Australia (CBAA) is the peak body and national representative organisation for over 450 community radio broadcasters across Australia. We welcome the opportunity to participate in the Paul Ramsay Foundation, Minderoo Foundation and the John and Myriam Wylie Foundation's independent review of Australia's COVID-19 response.

Community radio is a vital information source for communities underserved by commercial and public broadcasters – including communities in regional and remote Australia, First Nations communities, culturally and linguistically diverse communities, faith-based communities, youth and seniors' communities, the LGBTIQ+ community, and people with a disability. It is therefore a critical platform for ensuring all Australians have equal access rights to government information and messaging.

The impact of the pandemic on community radio and our communities

Community radio services have faced, and continue to face, significant challenges in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic due to ongoing impacts on staffing, volunteer engagement, and revenue sources. Community radio stations are particularly reliant on sponsorship from local small businesses and the music and arts industries, which have suffered badly during the pandemic and are still recovering.

Despite these challenges, the community broadcasting sector worked tirelessly to support and connect communities when they need it most. Stations have provided their communities with up-to-date local information that is in-language and community appropriate. They have acted as a catalyst for community dialogue and linked people to critical services. They worked to counter misinformation and disinformation and encourage their communities to get vaccinated. They have been vital points of connection for communities isolated due to lockdowns and social distancing.

5 million plus listeners across Australia tune into community radio stations each week. Of these listeners 727,000 listen exclusively to community radio and do not listen to commercial or ABC/SBS radio at all. Community radio listeners are also more likely to identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, identify as LGBTIQ+, have a disability or reading difficulty, speak a language other than English at home, and/or hold a religious faith. For many First Nations communities, culturally and linguistically diverse communities, and Australians with print disabilities, community radio is the only source of information and news available in their language, and/or delivered in a manner relevant to their cultural and community needs. Stations are critical conduits for hyperlocal information and news. 76% of community radio stations are located in regional or remote Australia, and they are often the only local media source. (Community Radio Listener Survey, <https://www.cbaa.org.au/broadcasters/get-data-national-listener-survey-station-census/national-listener-survey-fact-sheets>).

The following case studies are just two of the many examples of stations across Australia going above and beyond their ordinary broadcast duties provide the support needed by their communities:

- 4EB - Brisbane's multicultural radio service 4EB has been central to the cultural, social and media landscape in Australia for over 40 years – providing vital information to, and welcoming, people from 50+ language groups. Through the COVID pandemic, 4EB became even more critical to their listeners. They broadcast daily COVID-19 updates and in-language community service announcements in every program. They worked with the

state government to create 52 in-language COVID community service announcements. Living rooms became radio studios as broadcasters adapted their skills to continue programming remotely and maintain the deep sense of community and cultural connection they share with their listeners.

- WILCANNIA RIVER RADIO - When crises have struck Wilcannia in Western NSW, Wilcannia River Radio has undertaken exceptional work for its community. After the Barka (Darling River) ran dry, they distributed clean water to their community (around 750 people). To continue providing access to affordable, fresh food, they took over management of the local supermarket. When COVID hit Wilcannia, Wilcannia River Radio was at the heart of the community's response. They worked to get health advice out to the community in a way that could be easily understood, and dispelled misinformation through interviews with experts and community leaders. They supported remote students who were unable to access online learning through lockdowns by broadcasting lessons from the local school on the radio. They delivered more than 200 bags of supplies like milk, bread, sugar, flour, rice, pasta and toilet paper to Elders and families in isolation.

Through the pandemic community radio has played a vital role in combatting social isolation and connecting people to the critical services and information they need. As Australian communities strive to recover from COVID-19 and build resilience against future crises, community radio has never been more important.

Community radio and the Government's COVID-19 campaign

There is a clear role for community radio in the Government's public health and information campaigns related to COVID-19 due to the sector's unique listenership, ability to develop and share in language messaging and central role played in First Nations and remote communities (where community radio is often the only media source).

CBAA research found that in the first week of the Commonwealth's public COVID-19 campaign (roughly 16-26 March 2020), 81% of the surveyed community radio stations were playing government health information, although 66% of them were not being funded to do so.

Between 16 March and 7 May 2020, 151 community radio station broadcasts were monitored by the CBAA. Of these, nearly 75% were broadcasting government health messages at any time. Across these stations, over 30,000 plays of the health messages were broadcast within the 7.5-week period, reaching a potential audience of approximately 1,578,000 listeners weekly.

The Federal Government's COVID-19 campaign spend with community radio was focused on First Nations audiences, culturally and linguistically diverse communities, and people with a print disability. State and territory governments have spent portions of their health campaign budgets through community radio to target multilingual communities and communities with a disability.

There are a number of barriers to the better utilisation of community radio stations in Government health and information campaigns associated with the media buying process that Government departments are required to follow. There is insufficient impetus for the Government's master media agency Universal McCann (UM) to utilise relevant sector data to ensure that full and appropriate coverage of the population is properly considered. The Government's Guidelines on Information and Advertising Campaigns by non-corporate Commonwealth entities should be updated to include a mandatory requirement for Government to consider at risk communities or groups identified within the target audience and we recommend a positive obligation be included in the Guidelines for the community radio sector to be considered on its merits at the time when advertising/sponsorship is placed.

With 5 million+ Australians listening to community, there is a strong case for broadening the Government's engagement with the community radio sector, to facilitate resilience building in the sector and the communities they serve. This would ensure important messaging is amplified to otherwise under-served communities – particularly in regional and remote parts of the country – and that the equal access rights of all Australians in Government information and advertising campaigns are upheld.

An added benefit of more comprehensive and stable resourcing to community broadcasters would be to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic on the sector itself. Despite the challenges of maintaining operations, the community radio sector remained committed to keeping communities informed and up to date with the Government's latest health information. In most cases stations did this and continue to do this without any formal arrangement with Government in place.

In 1989, the community broadcasting sector established a national representative scheme to buy media on the sector's behalf. This organisation, Spots and Space, has a long tradition of working with government to purchase government campaigns and efficiently distribute campaign material and payment to the sector. Spots and Space, as the sector's largest media-buying agency, can mediate effectively between Government and hundreds of community radio stations to ensure a dynamic solution to reaching our sector's diverse audiences.

Recommendations for preparing for the next health crisis

Recommendation 1 – The community broadcasting sector be supported to ensure that stations have a secure base from which they can innovate and adapt to deliver local information and connect their communities through crises like the COVID-19 pandemic.

Recommendation 2 - The community broadcasting sector should be better utilised in government health and other advertising campaigns, including its COVID-19 campaign, to amplify messaging to otherwise under-served communities and provide targeted financial support to local community stations.

As the peak body for the community broadcasting sector, and an active participant in research, policy and planning, the CBAA is committed to further sharing our ideas, experience and knowledge with the Panel. We thank you for conducting this review and welcome any opportunity to support the Panel in its reporting.

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