Chapter 14
Analogue Nation, Digital Community
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Introduction
Community television test transmissions commenced in Australia in 1987, at a time when the structure of the national media system was changing dramatically. Equalisation policy was passed by the Senate the same year, making way for a comprehensive restructuring of commercial media, including changes in the ownership and control of the networks. Regional services were to be aggregated, and the ownership of metropolitan services would be concentrated. Alarmed by these prospects, Melbourne's screen development agency Open Channel published a report which restated the case for community television. The report's editors, filmmaker John Hughes and Kim Dalton, now the ABC's Director of Television, observed how 'commercial and Government services continue to centralise, generalise, move away from the local. There is no commitment within broadcasting to innovation, to creative development, to training or to participation, local origination or local accountability'. Hughes and Dalton did draw hope from the arrival in 1985 of Indigenous television in the remote townships of Ernabella in South Australia and Yuendumu in the Northern Territory. With no policy or legal
framework for Indigenous television, the communities had gone ahead and broadcast without permission, prompting the government to issue experimental licences under the Radiocommunications Act 1992 (Cth). Community television campaigners then envisioned a 'low power micro-station network evolving on the basis of diverse and particular local initiatives and needs'.

Two decades on, Australian media are experiencing another ownership upheaval with ramifications for local content and diversity, brought about by the dismantling of cross-media ownership rules. The Indigenous television sector is set for restructuring with the commitment of $48.5 million in commonwealth funding for program production over the next four years. But community television remains a strikingly undeveloped component of Australian broadcasting. While government has focused on meeting the needs of the incumbent commercial and national broadcasters in a highly regulated transition to digital broadcasting, so far community television has not received that attention, and may be extinguished as a result.

On the face of it, this is a surprising outcome. Digital television transmission is essentially a technology for increasing the capacity of broadcasting systems, and community services offer precisely the kind of low-cost, locally oriented content that one would expect to find on growing multiplexes: witness the proliferation of educational, minority language, local and public service broadcasting in the US, or the mandated carriage of Indigenous broadcasting on Canadian cable. Nor do such services threaten the commercial position of the incumbent broadcasters. From another perspective, the sidelining of community television seems to make some sense. In the era of broadband, the case for subsidising community media has become somewhat more complex than the old arguments over access, and the need for alternatives to mainstream broadcasting. Community broadcasting advocates now need to show why governments should allocate scarce public resources—spectrum—to small groups of audiovisual enthusiasts, at a time when government ministers routinely cite the internet as the final guarantee of diversity and plurality in news and information.

Our argument here is not directly about where community broadcasting should belong in media policy. Rather, it is concerned with drawing out the consequences of the somewhat accidental
relationship between the two. Although it is entirely peripheral within the broadcasting system, community television can tell us much about Australian broadcasting policy and its directions. That policy continues to be widely criticised for both failing to ensure a timely transition to digital, and for unfairly underwriting the commercial interests of the free-to-air networks. The position of community television suggests that this is only part of the story. The questions raised by Hughes and Dalton in 1985—concerning where we find localism, innovation and creative development in our media—are more pertinent than ever. Our research elsewhere suggests that the community media sector provides an institutional base for creative innovation and training, one that may be enhanced rather than diminished by the explosion of low-cost digital production and distribution. But the dynamics of centralisation and generalisation remain critical, and while the first part of this chapter tracks the strange failure of policy to date, the second part returns to the effects of those centripetal forces.

**The Digital Community?**

Community television is local, user-generated and governed by civil associations. It is not ‘television’ as traditionally understood. Although digital technology has the potential to advance community television’s non-standard television forms and practices, the government has decided to leave the sector in an analogue limbo—a situation we describe below. Community television may now have to look for alternative delivery platforms.

The campaign for community television was one outcome of the video access movement in the early 1970s, sparked by the availability of affordable and portable videotape technology. Groups experimented with a range of delivery options, including cable and ‘windows’ of content on SBS during the early 1980s. The first community stand-alone television test transmission occurred because of a bureaucratic mistake. The student-controlled community television group RMITV, based at the Royal Melbourne Institute for Technology (now RMIT University), submitted an application to the then Department of Communications and Transport (DCT) and were awarded an experimental licence. Unfortunately, the licence was ruled to be inappropriate for the purposes of a community television
broadcast and was soon nullified. As a result of the mishap, however, the DCT were compelled to provide the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal with the authority to issue RMITV with a test transmission permit. Other groups then applied for permits and the Communications Law Centre (CLC) was asked to evaluate the test transmissions. The CLC astutely concluded that although there was sufficient interest in community television, stations would struggle unless the government provided them with high-power transmission facilities. In the end the sector decided it should have an autonomous channel. This avoided difficult questions over legal responsibility for content in a shared arrangement and appeased commercial and national broadcasters, none of whom expressed any interest in hosting a community service.

In 1992 the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Transport, Communications and Infrastructure (HORSCOTCI) held an inquiry into the possible uses of the sixth high-power television channel—the only remaining nationally available channel in the spectrum plans of the time. HORSCOTCI assessed the suitability of various non-commercial services including community access, education, parliamentary broadcasts, Indigenous broadcasting and independent film. Although the committee preferred educational use of the channel (as proposed by the Vice Chancellors’ Committee), the education sector was not ready to commence broadcasting. Instead, the committee recommended that the sixth channel be made available for community television on a trial basis.

The government refused to provide funding or infrastructure for the services and the community sector was forced to sell airtime to help pay for transmission. University partners assisted some stations to meet transmission costs in the early years of the trial. With the low-power network model overruled in favour of city-wide transmission, the aspiring community television groups organised themselves into consortia and began broadcasting on temporary open ‘narrowcasting’ licences under what became known as the ‘community television trial’, a name suggesting a level of policy intent which was not elsewhere evident. These were not community broadcasting licences—narrowcasting was a regulatory device designed for niche broadcasting services, such as tourist information stations. The community stations were required to be not-for-profit, and were expected
to be guided by community broadcasting licence restrictions if they were to progress beyond the trial phase. Groups in Adelaide, Brisbane, Lismore, Melbourne, Perth and Sydney were licensed from 1993. Two additional licences awarded in Bendigo and Hobart failed to get off the ground.

The trial lasted for over a decade. The open narrowcasting licence meant that the regulator could not enforce sponsorship conditions, allowing stations to enter into financial relationships which did not technically fit within the guidelines of community broadcasting. The bureaucracy became increasingly frustrated by community television. The sector argued that the one-year temporary licence-renewal process was incapacitating, preventing stations from pursuing long-term partnerships or developing viable business models. In 1997 the regulator jettisoned the plan for an education channel and declared that the sixth channel need not be used for digital television tests. Instead, the ‘sixth channel, if put to any use at all, should be used for community access television, as most socio-economic benefits presently appear likely to follow from this use’. The sixth channel report was never tabled in parliament and the stations saw no direct outcomes from its recommendations. A series of unresolved inquiries and government reviews ensued.

When the digital conversion legislation went before parliament in 1998, it made no mention of community television, other than to stipulate that a review should be conducted into the arrangements for its carriage on a datacaster’s multiplex. (Many of the more complex questions in the legislation were dealt with in this manner.) Under a carriage arrangement, transmission would be provided by one of the new digital television services or by government (as a reduction of their licence fee) thereby resolving the main source of financial difficulty for the sector. The Community Broadcasting Association of Australia (CBAA) supported the plan for a carriage arrangement but stipulated that where a service was willing and capable of running a full, stand-alone 7MHz channel, they should be allowed to do so. With current technology, a standard-definition (SD) digital channel would enable community broadcasters to simulcast their analogue service, but would not provide sufficient bandwidth for more than a single stream of content at the equivalent quality to an analogue channel. With a full 7MHz channel, community
television could broadcast multiple channels for different community uses, deliver high-definition (HD) programming, and provide interactive services. The community broadcasters’ concern was that, as technical and content innovation in the broadcasting industries progressed, they would be stranded in an out-of-date single SD channel—effectively ‘locked’ into an analogue television paradigm within a digital environment.

Paradoxically, the proposed carriage arrangement depended on new datacasters taking up restrictive new digital licences which would preclude them from offering anything that looked like conventional television. When datacasting failed to attract any interest from potential broadcasters, community television was effectively sidelined. The sector raised the possibility of carriage on SBS once again, this time as a stand-alone SD service for the duration of the transition phase. The SBS option also had the added benefit of providing regional digital distribution, which would serve non-metropolitan communities with a community programming stream in the short term. Although SBS rejected the idea, the government still had the power to legislate carriage on the community sector’s behalf. The only other option was for stations to make a ‘direct switch’ to digital using their existing analogue frequencies. This would mean that there would be no simulcasting period in which analogue viewers could continue to receive the station, a highly problematic scenario given that the overall transition to broadcasting was clearly going to take longer than the 1998 legislation suggested. The government indicated that this was their preferred option, presumably hoping that digital-only community channels might help encourage viewers to switch. The sector rejected the idea outright. Stations were already experiencing a decline in audiences due to the take-up of digital television, but to wait until digital television reached critical mass and then have to attempt to win audiences back was not an option. Sponsors and programmers would be long gone.

The CBAA began lobbying for an end to the trial, hoping that if full community broadcasting licences were issued, arrangements for simulcasting in digital would have to follow. A statutory review of community television was tabled in parliament in June 2002. The review recommended greater regulatory certainty as well as stronger accountability and governance mechanisms. New licensing
arrangements were put in place (which allowed the sector some leeway with sponsorship and the sale of airtime) and Sydney, Perth, Melbourne and Brisbane received permanent analogue community licences. The Sydney and Adelaide licences changed hands while the one regional station, Lismore, continued to broadcast intermittently with no staff and barely enough sponsorship income to cover electricity costs.

In 2005, the CBAA conducted a survey of the four metropolitan stations operating that year. The survey revealed that these stations were screening 164 hours of locally produced programming a week, including sixty-one hours of news, and thirty-three hours of ethnic programming. Community radio research has shown a 7 per cent growth in audience numbers between 2004 and 2006 (totalling 47 per cent of the population). When asked why they listen to community radio, the majority of respondents cited ‘local information, local news’.

Without doubt, community broadcasting offers a model for local media development in regional Australia. However, the revocation of the sixth analogue channel reservation in 1999 meant that only those areas with an incumbent service could be guaranteed use of the channel. The Australian Broadcasting Authority (ABA, now the Australian Communications and Media Authority) stated that they were prepared to make analogue channels available on a case-by-case basis in regional areas where there was still spectrum available. As a result, a group in Mt Gambier, Bushvision, received a trial licence in 2005. Novacast, located in Newcastle (the largest non-capital city in Australia), applied for a community television licence that same year but was informed that there was no spectrum available in the area. The group now operates on a narrowcast licence on Satellite Community TV with a limited audience and extremely limited revenue options. LINC TV in Lismore attempted to extend its transmission reach to the densely populated coastal areas—a move that would have improved its revenue stream dramatically—but discovered that the sixth channel reservation had been deleted in a 2002 Licence Area Plan (LAP).

With limited audiences and low levels of program production, regional community television’s prospects have always appeared bleak. Bushvision hoped to overcome program and sponsorship
obstacles by establishing a regional programming stream that would incorporate content from rural communities across the country. ACCESS 31 in Perth decided on a similar model when it persuaded the Western Australian state government to carry its programming on Thursday nights and continuously on the weekends on its Westlink Satellite service. The townships of Albany and Bunbury have harnessed old transmitters to rebroadcast the Westlink/Access 31 service over the air. The ultimate aim was to achieve independently licensed community TV services in non-metropolitan areas, backed up with regional programming feeds provided by other community stations to fill the gaps. Such attempts to create viable models have, to date, received little or no support from DCITA, revealing complacency in regards to the sector’s survival and confusion over what should be considered ‘appropriate’ services.

By 2006, the sector was reasonably well established in urban areas, with a combined national audience estimated by the CBAA at 3.8 million weekly viewers. But despite a long sequence of reviews and amendments to the 1998 legislation, there is still no policy or resolution as to the future of community television. In parliament in May 2006, the current communications minister, Senator Helen Coonan, remained tight-lipped on the issues of digital simulcast when pressured by the Labor shadow communications minister, Senator Stephen Conroy:

Senator Conroy—Has spectrum [been] reserved for the community television sector to move to digital broadcasting?

Senator Coonan—That is one of the matters under discussion, as to how they could be accommodated either as a ‘must carry’ or in some other way.

Senator Conroy—Are there alternative ways?

Senator Coonan—There are alternatives to ‘must carry’, yes.

Senator Conroy—Could you let us know?
Senator Coonan—I am not going to give you all the alternatives.

Senator Conroy—No, I am interested.

Senator Coonan—We are currently discussing ways to accommodate community television.

Senator Conroy—I am not looking for a decision. I was just wondering what those other ways would be.

Senator Coonan—They are under discussion. I am not going to go through them all for you.

Senator Conroy—if they are a secret, I am prepared to sign the national secrets Act.

Senator Coonan—No, it is not a national secret, but it is under development, so it is inappropriate, I would think, within the realm of these estimates to be talking about it.

Senator Conroy—you would not want to see us ending up with less television if we switched from analog to digital, if the community TVs did not come across. There would actually be less television available by moving from analog to digital, if they got left behind. You would not want to see that as an outcome, I presume?

Senator Coonan—who said they wanted to see that?

Senator Conroy—that is what I am saying.11

Plainly, the hope that permanent licences would resolve the long-term situation of the stations has not been fulfilled. In October 2006, legislation was passed which will see the two remaining digital channels—both earlier earmarked for datacasting—auctioned off, one for datacasting and one for mobile television services. Incumbent commercial broadcasters will be permitted to bid for the mobile
television licence; the datacasting licence will be subject to the same extraordinarily restrictive conditions which bedevilled the last attempt to find a broadcaster willing to pay for the privilege of not broadcasting television. There is no stipulation that either service should carry a community channel, although it is possible that one might. Without a datacasting option, government may yet find another solution, perhaps turning back to SBS. Further ahead, the disposition of the spectrum currently used for analogue services after the putative 2012 switch-off will remain an open issue. In any case, the minister has informed the sector that the government will not fund digital transmission or subsidise existing stations through a direct switchover period. Some of those stations will struggle to survive a further extended period of tortuous uncertainty, relieved only by the occasional cryptic reassurance.

Why is there no digital transition plan for community television? We can draw several points from the experience of the sector to date. First, the sector has gradually emerged in the absence of any foundational policy mandate, from either Coalition or Labor governments. In some respects its appearance was accidental, and its survival unintended. The sector received policy sanction through the ‘sixth channel’ inquiries, but was anointed by default rather than design. History would have been different if universities had been prepared to pursue their own aspirations as broadcasters. However, even without a strong policy remit, the sector has been effectively represented and recognised within the broader policy debate throughout this period: the CBAA has had a presence in every major media policy review, and there is clearly an element of support for community broadcasting among interested politicians across Australia.

Second, there are clearly doubts as to the relevance of the sector in an era of multiplying audio and video offerings on the internet; to some extent these have been answered by better research on the audiences and reach of the sector\(^2\), although a clearer understanding of the institutional role of community broadcasters in a converged media environment is only beginning to emerge.

Third, questions remain about the financial sustainability of the sector. The issue of transmission costs, raised by the CLC in 1990, remains at the heart of the matter. Since community television's
inception, government has insisted that it must fund its own operations, including transmission and programming. Transmission has proven to be an onerous burden on stations, a situation exacerbated with the privatisation of transmission infrastructure in 1999, despite the commonwealth’s assurances at the time that the new arrangements would protect community broadcasters. Melbourne’s community television station, C31, pays $180 000 a year for transmitter site fees alone (the transmitter and its maintenance are additional costs). In 1998, Senator Alston had promised the sector a SD channel free of charge, which would have meant that revenue from sponsorship, member fees and the sale of airtime could be dedicated to station operations, training and programming. The CBAA has estimated the costs of digital transmission as follows:

- for carriage on a datacasting service: $5.65 million in one-off capital costs and $1.797 million in operating costs per year
- for carriage by a national broadcaster such as SBS: $7.57 million in one-off capital costs and $2.415 million in operating costs per year
- for a stand-alone transmission facility (that is, a 7MHz digital multiplex): $15.5 million in one-off capital costs and $4.732 million in operating costs per year.

A 2007 House of Representatives Standing Committee recommended that the government provide $6 million per station for digital transmission costs. If the history of community television reviews is anything to go by, the recommendation will not get far. On the other hand, substantial public funding has been devoted to defraying the costs of digital conversion for other Australian broadcasters, both public and private. In 1998, the ABC received an additional $20.8 million over five years and SBS an additional $17.7 million over five years to assist in the upgrade of their equipment and facilities from analogue to digital. In 2000, the ABC received a further $36.8 million over three years and SBS a further $29.4 million over four years for the second phase of capital equipment funding for digital. The government also made a commitment to fund the distribution of their digital television programs to transmission sites, and to broadcast their digital television programs to viewers. Further, in 2000 the
government committed $260 million over thirteen years to the Regional Equalisation Plan (REP), which represented a licence fee rebate covering half of the total estimated costs of digital conversion for regional commercial broadcasters. As a rationale for providing this support, the government acknowledged that ‘regional broadcasters do not earn as much money as metropolitan broadcasters, so paying for digital television is harder’.

The issue is not really whether community television can survive in the marketplace (these are not commercial stations, after all) but whether the cost of transmitting a digital signal is proportionate to the perceived public value of the service. Implicit within this is an overall judgment about what digital television should be for and how resources are best allocated. Innovation, creative development, training and participation—the wish-list of Hughes and Dalton back in 1986—have little place in the current television policy framework. But what then is the television future embodied in a decade of law and policy and public debate? Is there a place for community communication in digital television?

An alternative future remains an option: digital television should, in many respects, be a more suitable platform than analogue for community content, as the technology’s flexibility can accommodate non-standard television forms. It allows for autonomous channels which could potentially accommodate all of the interests flagged in the sixth channel inquiry of the 1990s: education, parliamentary broadcasts (and other electronic government content), Indigenous broadcasting and independent film, as well as content produced by cultural institutions and civil society associations seeking to connect with their constituencies. If a ‘community multiplex’ were established, a portion of that spectrum could be leased to a commercial provider, with the proceeds funding transmission for all services. In the digital television landscape, community television has the potential to act as an intermediary between the vibrant amateur domain and high-end public and commercial television broadcasting. Such a role would build upon the existing function of community television as the major training ground for the national and commercial stations. Without these services, industry may see a significant decline in talent coming into the sector. Although media training is available in the tertiary sector, community broadcasting
provides tangible experience in station operations and hands-on technical knowledge. Moreover, community television is an established content proving ground, nurturing programs and talent, including some of Australia's most recognisable names in entertainment and news.

The Analogue Nation
The difficulty lies in locating the sources of that possible future within the policy present. In general terms, Australian media policy is often seen as an expression of economic or political liberalism, or as technology-driven, or as the creature of corporate influence. It may be better understood as the evolutionary outcome of those same dynamics of 'centralisation' and 'generalisation' that concerned John Hughes and Kim Dalton in 1986. The important point here is the extraordinarily vigorous survival of the nation-building model of broadcasting, with an increasingly high level of government intervention evident in all sectors: the directly publicly funded broadcasters, the commercial free-to-air operators, and subscription providers. The disposition of public resources has a substantial influence on market forces in broadcasting, and it is this 'national' dimension of policy which we think is now most significant in understanding the current impasse. But this is not a problem specific to digital broadcasting: the Australian regime in this area is a good example of a more general pattern of intervention across a number of service industries. As elsewhere, the broadcasting policy framework is complex and has some unusual features in comparison to other countries, involving tight content controls for new entrants (the datacasters) and new forms of content and format regulation for existing broadcasters, inhibiting their ability to go beyond conventional television services. The statutory mandate for HD broadcasting is a particularly distinctive element, constructed and regulated in a way which has reduced the multi-channel and interactive potential of the new platform.

Thomas elsewhere has described Australia's version of digital television as a digital emulation of analogue television. Looking back at the extended and bitterly contested development of the 1998 legislative and policy framework, the new platform appears to have been conceived primarily as a parallel broadcasting service to be
constructed alongside the analogue one, with the focus on meeting the requirements of broadcasters in establishing digital services. Although the legislation proposed a finite period of analogue and digital simulcasting, a plan to switch viewers from analogue to digital was strikingly absent, and this gap remains a glaring weakness in the overall framework, notwithstanding the amendments of 2006, and the subsequent creation of the Digital Australia agency. The government’s objective, it may be inferred, has been to engineer a very gradual transition to digital while retaining key features of analogue television in digital form. This appears to include an expectation that both public and commercial television broadcasters will continue to play an important national cultural and political role, with considerable government support; and that longstanding protections for the industry should remain, thereby preserving as long as possible the analogue model of audience aggregation. The policy discourages or forestalls the fragmentation (and also the potential growth) of media audiences, both through the regulation of existing services and through the construction of regulatory obstacles to new ones. The attempts of the Seven Network to create a multi-channel service out of its digital channel have been consistently rebuffed, while the communications minister has aired her doubts as to the economic viability of new commercial services on several occasions.

At the same time, the government has resisted proposals to establish a national Indigenous broadcasting network. A fully Aboriginal-owned commercial satellite channel, Imparja, began transmission in 1988 and is available across one-third of the country. Alongside its main channel, which retransmits content from 9, 10, ABC and SBS, Imparja’s Channel 31 (ICTV) screens up to twenty hours a day of Indigenous programming, news and community information. Eighty per cent of this content is in Indigenous languages and can be accessed for retransmission by 200 Remote Indigenous Broadcasting Services (RIBS). Content is provided by a number of organisations in the Pilbara, Kimberley, Warlpiri, Ngaanyatjarra and Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara areas. Goolarri Media in Broome also produces content and transmits terrestrially to the Broome area via an open narrowcasting licence. Support for a more comprehensive service was evident in the Productivity Commission’s 1999–2000 broadcasting inquiry, which recommended the allocation of
spectrum and the development of more appropriate licensing categories for Indigenous broadcasters. In 2005, the government called for submissions on the ‘viability of creating an Indigenous television service and the arrangements that should apply to the digital transmission of such a service using spectrum in the broadcasting services bands’. The Indigenous sector argued that the primary function of a National Indigenous Television service (NITV) would be ‘to inform, educate and entertain’. It would allow for the expression of a dynamic and evolving Indigenous culture; help maintain language and culture; assist in the development of the Indigenous creative industries; provide community education; and present Indigenous stories to all Australians, thereby promoting a richer understanding of the nation. The NITV proposal was clearly an attempt to strengthen the Indigenous nation(s) by aggregating audiences under a fairly traditional, institution-building, public service television model. New Zealand and Canada provided influential precedents. But if the original NITV model conformed to the nation-building broadcasting paradigm, what eventuated was far from that. The NITV proposal was rejected by the commonwealth in favour of a plan to allocate funds directly to Aboriginal program production ($48.5 million over four years), to be delivered by Imparja or community television (Channel 31) and pay TV in metropolitan areas.

The NITV decision may prove to be a practical one, with immediate benefits for Indigenous production. It is also consistent with an underlying official reluctance to establish new television services, or to increase competition in existing services. With the exception of the proposed mobile television licence, it appears that, at least at a policy level, digital television has not been seen as a way of creating new markets for television, but has been designed more defensively, to manage a technical transition for existing markets, which may then help to preserve them in the face of increasingly popular alternative forms of audiovisual entertainment. There is a tendency in the analysis of media policy to assume that broadcasting is something for everyone, because virtually all Australian households have a television receiver. However, television is not equally for everyone. Market research indicates that there are substantial variations in the consumption of television, and particularly that commercial free-to-air television is watched most by relatively older and poorer Australians,
who are also more likely to live outside the major cities. This audience is a core political constituency for a government which has thrived on what the political scientist Judith Brett has called ‘national popularism’.18

Rather than withdrawing from media industries, Australia’s conservative government has become progressively more entangled with them, both through more complex and convoluted regulation, and as a commercial player in the market itself, as one of the most important buyers of advertising time on the commercial networks. This is one area where the centralising and generalising dynamic that concerned John Hughes and Kim Dalton has developed considerably over the two decades since their report appeared. The boundaries between public broadcasters and their commercial competitors have blurred, with both sectors now receiving substantial amounts of government money, albeit in different forms and for different purposes. The fact that the Coalition has, from time to time, encouraged the aspirations of the Nine Network to be regarded as ‘the national broadcaster’ is only one aspect of this shift.19 The more important aspect is the steadily increasing political and governmental investment in the aggregated audiences of commercial television, through a period of rapidly growing public revenues. Since 1999, the commonwealth has spent close to $1 billion in advertising, with little of the accountability and evaluation that is usually attached to significant public expenditure. This does not include political advertising, although the styles of government and political advertising are becoming blurred. (It should be added that state governments have also significantly increased television spending in recent years.) Researchers have begun to examine the growth of government advertising ostensibly devoted to explaining new laws and policies, often highly contentious: examples include gun control, work choices, the new tax system, national security and Medicare.20 In the period of the Keating government, commonwealth advertising also increased, spiking especially in election years. That pattern has continued, but as Table 14.1 shows, government expenditure in non-election years has also increased.

Expenditure at these levels now comprises a small but nevertheless notable portion of overall commercial free-to-air television revenue, which is now over $3 billion annually. It is also significant in
comparison to the ABC’s budget, currently around $800 million. Further, the government is in an unusual position in relation to other commercial advertisers: it has very deep pockets, especially after Australia’s long economic expansion. A lack of competition among broadcasters will raise the cost of advertising, but this is not a problem for an advertiser with the resources of the commonwealth.

Table 14.1: Federal Government Expenditures for Advertising Campaigns over $10,000

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Government advertising functions as a commercial subsidy for incumbent broadcasters, which also politically benefits the incumbent party. It is often criticised as wasteful and partisan. The argument for our purposes is not that this increasing expenditure is necessarily a bad thing, or that it is a misuse of public funds, or that it has been a distinctive strategy of the federal Coalition. It is clearly an emerging feature of contemporary Australian and other governments, and will continue to be controversial whether or not stricter controls are
introduced. This evolving aspect of government must necessarily further complicate its relationships with media, and has done so through the long, stuttering debate over digital broadcasting. The long-term consequence is that commercial television and government media have become progressively more important to each other, at a time when technological change has also made the established analogue media system vulnerable. With the commercial sector and its audiences at the centre of the policy action, community media, as well as new market-driven ventures, have become an ever lower-order priority. The platform switch to digital thus puts at risk the very institutions that make low-cost, local innovation in television possible.

Conclusion
The argument and narrative traced here have several consequences for our understanding of the transition to digital broadcasting. First, what we are calling the ‘analogue nation’ is consistent with the concentration of media audiences, the reluctance to open the system to new services or expanded platforms, and the protection of incumbents. Analogue television works and has worked extremely well in aggregating audiences, especially in the Coalition’s key older constituency. Alongside television, the government has devoted increasing resources to direct marketing to reach individual electors. The internet has not been adopted as a major vehicle for political communication. Our argument is not that government advertising is the dominant driver of media policy—clearly there are a range of competing interests in this area, including the underlying economic value of the spectrum and the public investment in the established broadcasting system, as well as the interests of incumbent industries. But any fragmenting of the television audience across new services, networks or channels, including community television, is not only not in the commercial interests of incumbent broadcasters, but would also involve some costs and strategic rethinking on the part of government. More comprehensive media reform is therefore unlikely. Community television has not been given a home on the digital platform because, like multi-channelling, additional channels and interactive television, it is a second- or third-order service in the analogue model.
The second consequence is that studies of Australian digital television need to address the governmental construction of the 'national interest'. While policy analysis is often concerned with gauging technological shifts and consumer benefits, and shifting concepts of the public interest, the calculus of 'what is best for Australians' will necessarily be quite different. We often describe the relations between government and the media in ways which may be illuminating but also imply a normative polarisation of these domains. Terry Flew, for example, has written about the 'social contract' implicit in Australian broadcasting. In 2000, the Productivity Commission's broadcasting inquiry highlighted the problems created by what it called a quid pro quo approach to media policy, characterised by the construction of elaborate and ultimately unsustainable privileges and obligations. The quid pro quo game was propelled by the power of media proprietors to exercise political influence, and the reciprocal capacity of political leaders to dispense or withhold preferment. This analysis demonstrated the need, still urgent, for a more transparent and competitive model. However, it presupposes a separation between the government's role in pursuing sound policies in the public interest and that of the media as a regulated sector of private enterprise. If we recognise that the commonwealth itself has now become a major consumer of the services the broadcasting industry provides, its interests in media policy become both more direct and multifarious. In these circumstances a 'public interest' analysis loses traction, because it is incommensurable with the 'national interest' rationale which is driving key decisions.

Finally, this analysis suggests an opportunity to connect the analysis of media policy more frequently and more deeply with broader studies of public policy and politics. In our view, current work in political studies does help clarify the current impasse, and indeed the broader failings of innovation policy. The position of the government on media policy is consistent with its broader political style and communications strategy, particularly those of Prime Minister John Howard. Judith Brett and Paul Kelly have drawn out some key features of this majoritarian nationalism: the government has consistently presented itself as the unique defender of the national interest, national culture and social cohesion, through a period of heightened threats to national security and continuing
military engagement in East Timor, and wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Fairness, egalitarian informality and sporting success are frequently identified as critical national attributes. While drawing deeply on the historical profile of the Liberals as a party with a broad, non-sectional middle-class constituency, the government presents itself as embracing the interests of ordinary working Australians, in opposition to arrogant elites. Howard’s own preferred medium for communication is radio, which he uses extensively and constantly. Prime ministerial press conferences, other than ‘door stops’, are now rare, and longer interviews on current affairs programs are occasional. All this amounts to a strategy to manage political communication as closely as possible; and to reduce where possible the influence of intermediaries who may distort or misrepresent the government’s positions. Where media policy departs from Judith Brett’s influential analysis of the Howard government is in Brett’s emphasis on the neoliberal or public choice motivations lying behind some commonwealth policies. The case of the media draws our attention instead to another pattern of behaviour: the propensity of governments to trade off the economic benefits of competition against more immediately pragmatic outcomes, even where these involve considerable regulatory overheads. The management of media policy and practice have been central ingredients in the success of recent Australian governments; they are also important areas of failure. But media and communications is often overlooked in more general accounts of public policy; and media policy in turn is an analytic island only occasionally connected to larger bodies.

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Meadows, Michael, Forde, Susan, Foxwell, Kerrie and Ewart, Jacqui, Community Media Matters: An Audience Study of the Australian Community Broadcasting Sector, Griffith University, Brisbane, 2007.


Notes
1 Research for this chapter was supported by the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence in Creative Industries and Innovation (Grant no. CE0561908).
Hughes and Dalton, p. 11.
3 Michaels.
4 Hughes and Dalton, p. 13.
5 Rennie and Thomas.
6 Communications Law Centre.
7 Australian Broadcasting Authority, p. xi.
8 Community Broadcasting Association of Australia (Rennie and Sice).
9 McNair Ingenuity Research.
10 Retransmission does not require a broadcast licence, only an apparatus licence.
11 Commonwealth, p. 70.
12 Meadows et al.
13 House of Representatives Standing Committee on Communications, Information Technology and the Arts.
14 Thomas.
15 NITV Committee.
16 Productivity Commission.
17 ibid.
18 Brett.
19 See Inglis.
20 Barns; Ward; Young.
21 Flew.
22 Brett.
23 Kelly.