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Bushvision: Broadcasting through difficult times
Ellie Rennie
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Water bubbles through the limestone in Mt Gambier (SA), meanders through underground caves & tunnels and surfaces at the poorly named ‘blue lake’, which inexplicably turns to brilliant turquoise in the summer months. The subterranean water system produces enough timber, Kraft cheese, lamb and potatoes to make our drought-stricken regions green with envy. But Mount Gambier now has another rare and coveted resource: a community television channel.

Bushvision, a not-for-profit association, received its trial licence in July 2005. It broadcasts 24/7 with 4 hours of fresh content per day, which it hopes to increase to 8 hours by the end of the year. Eventually, the station plans to broadcast digitally across rural Australia as a community network, sourcing content from disparate towns; places which have more in common with each other than they do with their capital cities. It is a grand vision, underpinned by social enterprise and a keen awareness of what can happen when media participation is appropriately harnessed. One might even say that Bushvision’s objectives put the government’s digital broadcasting plans to shame.

The idea surfaced on an email list made up of several hundred landowners, originally established to address land management rights. The deeper issue, as they saw it, was a crisis in representation: decision-makers in the cities have little understanding of life in rural Australia, leading to inadequate policies, the disenfranchisement of communities and low morale. A rural television service could stimulate national debate on rural concerns and assist in the development of creative industries outside of the capital cities. Leon Ashby, a dairy farmer with a Centenary Award for community work related to the primary industries, took a chance and left his acreage for the airwaves. As President of Bushvision, his plan is to get the service into towns across the country, disseminating community information and providing audio-visual learning solutions to isolated households and businesses. The station will also share content with the metropolitan community television stations, giving city folk a real look at life in the bush.

Although the word ‘network’ has a bad name in relation to regional television, Ashby hopes that an available programming feed will encourage other groups to seek their own community licences, rather than simply retransmitting the service. This would enable towns to insert locally-specific programming, community information and sponsorship announcements into the schedule. Bushvision intends to fund its own activities through sponsorship revenue derived from companies and industry bodies wanting to reach rural communities throughout the country. Programming will include rural news, daily market reports, bush sports such as rodeo and local horse races, national forums for debate on community issues and a rural women’s show (and they don’t mean ‘McLeod’s Daughters’).

This model – 24/7 available programming, with revenue derived from large sponsors rather than local businesses – resolves some of the major obstacles that have so far prevented viable regional community television services. Community television stations rely on sponsorship, donations and sale of airtime to cover their costs. Although this model has succeeded in the capital cities (to varying degrees), it requires an audience base large enough to attract sponsors and producers. The only other regional community licence, LINC TV (in Lismore, NSW), broadcasts intermittently with volunteer staff and barely enough sponsorship to pay their electricity bills.

The other major obstacle to the development of rural community television is digital television itself. When the community television trial began in 1993, communities across the country were eligible to apply for a licence, which would allow them access to the “sixth channel” (usually channel 31 on the UHF bands). In 1999 the Minister revoked the use of the sixth channel in all areas other than where there was an existing service due to digital television planning. As a result, Brisbane, Melbourne, Perth, Adelaide, Sydney and Lismore have been allowed to retain their analogue community television stations but other towns and cities can only apply if there is other spectrum available in their area. Mt Gambier was one of the lucky ones. A group in Newcastle, Novacast, found there was no available spectrum and have had to settle for satellite delivery and a limited audience reach. LINC TV attempted to extend their signal to the coast (Byron Bay and surrounds) but discovered that changes were made to the Licence Area Plan (LAP) in 2002 which prohibited any such move.

Furthermore, the government has delayed making a decision on how community television services will be accommodated in the digital television plans, leaving current services locked into analogue transmission where they are inaccessible to digital audiences. Ashby hopes that the government will, in the short term, require SBS to carry community TV as an extra channel on their digital signal, making Bushvision available via non-metropolitan digital free-to-air. As he sees it, a digitally available Bushvision will encourage rural households to purchase digital set top boxes, speeding up the analogue “switch off” date – at which point more spectrum will be available for local community television licensees. The government has so far been unwilling to impose such a carriage arrangement on
SBS, citing cost as the main reason. In 2000 the government decided to provide license fee relief to commercial regional television broadcasters during the emerging years of digital television, a policy initiative estimated at up to $260 million in revenue forgone. Community television, on the other hand, has not received government funding for digital conversion, or at any time during its analogue history.

Bushvision is likely to attract significant support from rural MPs concerned at the diminishing levels of local content and the imminent changes to cross media ownership laws. Canberra will be harder to convince. At a public meeting held in June, a representative from the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts (DCITA) voiced concern that a Bushvision network goes against the ‘local’ character of community television and that such a service would be better suited to a commercial narrowcasting licence. It seems that community television is only deemed legitimate when it is marginal, impoverished and geographically restricted.

The Department’s resistance ignores the fact that successful community networks already exist in the broadcasting environment. The Indigenous-owned satellite service, Imparja, has its own Channel 31 (Indigenous Community Television, or ICTV) which screens over 10 hours a day of Indigenous programming, news and community information, most of it in Aboriginal languages. As Imparja’s footprint covers one third of the country and can only be received by satellite dish, around 30 Indigenous community licensees retransmit the service via their low power terrestrial transmitters. Content is provided by a number of organisations in the Pilbara, Kimberly, Warlpiri, Ngaanyatjarra and Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara areas. The National Indigenous Radio Service and the Digital Delivery Network similarly provide radio programming to community radio licensees across the country. On their own initiative, ACCESS 31 in Perth persuaded the Western Australian State Government to carry their programming on Thursday nights and continuously on the weekends via its Westlink Satellite service. The townships of Albany and Bunbury have harnessed their old SBS TV transmitters to re-broadcast the Westlink/Access 31 service on the ground, using a retransmission licence. ACCESS 31 considers this a step to locally licensed community stations throughout Western Australia. Interest in community media is difficult to ignore; we now have more community radio stations than commercial stations. Such growth demonstrates the strength of our civil society, that our population is media-literate and that a viable ‘third sector’ of the media is entirely possible.

There is something seriously wrong with our broadcasting structures when a non-profit association, formed to represent and serve a significant community interest, is told it should operate under commercial conditions. At the very least, it shows a lack of understanding of the role of the third sector and its communication needs. But it also uncovers a bias towards commercial broadcasters – a bias that, in this instance, is working to stifle our best prospect for a successful, rural-oriented television service. For now, our farming communities beyond Mt Gambier will continue to look hopefully to the skies, not for rain, but for a signal that over-the-air bush television has finally arrived.

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