

# Australian community television in crisis

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The recent public campaign to prevent the closure of Melbourne Community Television (MTC) has underscored the parlous state of community broadcasting in Australia. Known as Channel 31, MTC was forced to standdown 12 paid staff on April 23 and won a reprieve only thanks to public donations totalling more than \$100,000. The funds raised are merely a stay of execution. High running costs and the commercial basis on which community television is forced to operate will continue to threaten the station's operations.

In 1992 the Federal Labor Government allocated use of the last free-to-air television channel (known as the sixth channel) to community access broadcasting on a trial basis, pending a decision on its permanent use. The trial followed years of short term "narrowcasts" by community organisations that continued to lobby for permanent broadcasting rights.

The government's decision had nothing to do with supporting community or independent broadcasting. Its own licensing conditions stipulated that there would be no government funding; stations would be funded by advertising and commercial deals and there was no guarantee of a permanent license.

With these conditions in mind the government itself predicted that it was "possible or even probable that without taxpayer subsidy community access television ... will not succeed."

Unlike even the United States, the government did not require Australia's new cable television companies to dedicate a channel to community access television. The Keating Labor government thus gave cable companies Optus and Rupert Murdoch's Foxtel the right to exclude all non-profit broadcasting.

Melbourne's Channel 31 is one of only five community broadcast licensees (out of the 8 established nationally) that has managed to 'survive' within the government's regulatory framework. The channel is

operated by a consortium of 27 community production groups with programming enabling many ethnic, cultural, religious and community organisations access to television which they would not otherwise have. Among the programs are news and current affairs, gay and lesbian programming, locally produced and imported programs in Greek, Chinese, Turkish, Italian, Serbian and Russian. The Jewish community produces programs and there are music, sports, comedy, university lectures and student television shows. The station has also broadcast some diverse material including the "McLibel" documentary, an expose of the operations of the McDonald fast food corporation, which the BBC and the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) and Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) had refused to screen.

However programs such as the latter are the exception rather than the rule as the lack of resources and continuous financial pressure prevents the emergence of a genuinely independent media able to offer an alternative to the major TV networks. Producers must compete for access to equipment and either fund their own programs or win commercial backing. Thus commercialism encroaches at all levels of the station. Indeed the crisis at Channel 31 was triggered by the loss of its high-rating harness racing coverage after the broadcast rights were bought out by cable TV. The sudden drop in advertising revenue caused the station to go into a tailspin.

While the public donated \$250,000 to Channel 31's recent appeal, the station has announced plans to raise yet another \$250,000. And reluctantly but inevitably proposals have been made to charge all program providers for airtime. Currently the station sells airtime to "external" providers with member groups of Channel 31's governing consortium enjoying free airtime. Briz31, in the state of Queensland, and Community Television Sydney (CTS) in New South Wales, already

charge for all airtime.

The problems in Melbourne have been common to all the interstate community broadcasters. In 1996 CTS was forced to appoint an administrator after it was unable to pay its operating costs and creditors made moves to seize its assets. The station had previously only been able to broadcast by striking a deal for corporate sponsorship, which saw large chunks of airtime reserved solely for profitable broadcasts. The station also relied heavily on direct payments from its member groups who could not afford to pay. CTS is still under administration.

The ongoing crisis facing the financially borderline community television sector has to be seen in the context of a generalised government assault on non-profit broadcasting. Australia's two government funded television stations, the ABC and SBS, have both had their funding cut severely in recent years. Since the Liberal-National Coalition government's 1996 budget the ABC has suffered an annual funding cut of 12 percent with over 1,000 jobs shed. In addition, the Howard government has supplied only half the required \$40 million required by the ABC to shift to digital broadcasting. Both networks are being effectively privatised, with plans by ABC management to end almost all local production except news and current affairs and SBS forced to air advertisements and push heavily into sports broadcasting in an effort to boost ratings.

The narrowness and homogeneity of the rest of the Australian media, including cable television, is a direct result of the drive for profit and the resultant concentration of ownership. Far from private competition leading to a more diverse range of product the commercial pressures faced by the large TV networks has produced an endless round of cost-cutting and a decline in program quality. Just last month, Channel 9 announced the sacking of 137 staff, including 37 in news and current affairs, and Channel 7 axed two news programs with a loss of 15 staff. At the same time the broadcast rights to a large number of movies and world news services is controlled by the cable-networks and therefore out of reach for those unable to pay hefty subscription fees.

The community television trial in Australia is set to end in June 2000. With no guarantee of permanent broadcast rights, let alone funding and other vital

resources and equipment, any notion of independent broadcasting has become somewhat farcical.



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