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Australian Churches Media Association
(ACMA)

Submission to The Productivity Commission
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Australian Churches Media Association (ACMA)

Who Are We?

We are a national, ecumenical organisation representing television production agencies auspiced by mainstream Christian Churches in Australia.

ACMA is the only religious association, whose members work in television production, representing the dominant religious culture in Australia.

Whilst the membership of ACMA is Christian it acknowledges the right of other religious groups, Christian and non-Christian, access to commercial television.

Many of the production agencies are ecumenical, ie with multi-denominational membership.

ACMA has had an advocacy role on behalf of the churches for over 40 years.

The objects of the association include a negotiation role on behalf of its membership with the Australian Broadcasting Authority, Federation of Australian Commercial Television Stations, Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, television stations, networks and other relevant bodies.

Our members produce programs that range in variety and style from 15 second religious spot material to 1 hour features. Adult and children's programming, magazine and discussion, social documentary and drama, devotional and seasonal specials.

Why a Submission to the Productivity Commission?

As a significant community group ACMA has a special interest in the Commission's Terms of Reference in relation to the 'protection of certain social and cultural values' and the 'interests of consumers in broadcasting services'.

Members of the Australian Churches Media Association

The Australian Churches Media Association is a National Organisation representing the mainstream Churches in Australia.



New South Wales

*Anglican Media
Christian Media...Australian Capital Territory
Christian Media...North Coast
Christian Media...Illawarra*

Victoria

*Albert Street Productions**
Christian Television...Victoria*

Queensland

Christian Television...Queensland

South Australia

*Christian Television...South Australia
Lutheran Media**

Western Australia

Christian Television...Western Australia

Tasmania

Christian Television...Tasmania

**Although many agencies supply material that is broadcast nationally those indicated are national suppliers acting on behalf of national constituencies.*

***Supplier of Catholic programming nationally. All Christian Television agencies are ecumenical with a wide membership of mainstream Christian Churches.*

Background

History

From television's earliest days in Australia, religious programming has featured as a basic element of commercial television broadcasting. This was, and is a recognition of the fact that religion in its many forms plays an important role in Australian society, be it at the level of formal, organised worship or at the level of general social mores and beliefs.

The impact on our lives of technology has been and is so great that it is easily, and often, overlooked; but it reaches into everyone of our interests and activities – including religion, which, like it or not, be it of declining influence or not, remains a force in the lives of the majority of Australians at many levels. At the same time we acknowledge our multi-culturalism and the growing secularisation of our society, while there are some modest signs of growth of religious revivalism both from Christian and from other faiths.

In Australia we have so far avoided the American experience of the 'Electronic Church', due in part, we would argue, because of the obligation by commercial television to represent Australian religious views.

In common with society and the TV industry we have changed from reflecting 'the mainstream of Christian tradition' to 'principal religious themes', from 'Churches' to 'traditions' and from 'evangelism' – trying to reach those outside the Churches – to measured exposition more in line with the way broadcasting deals with serious issues in other areas of output. However there remains a role for the provision of services for people who cannot get to church.

Prior to the Broadcasting Services Act 1992, the issue of religious programming on commercial television stations was governed by a direction made in 1989 by the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal, which provided for a minimum broadcast time and reasonable facilities. The situation is now governed by Schedule 2 of the BSA, which provides the 'licensee will broadcast matter of a religious nature during such periods as the ABA determines and, if the ABA directs, will do so without charge' (cl 7 (2) (c)).

Background cont.

It is acknowledged that without this provision the churches would not be represented on commercial television.

On-Air

Although no determination has been made by the ABA or Code of Practice from FACTS, stations and networks honor the obligation by providing both airtime and facilities. These differ markedly from station to station and network to network. Since the inception of the BSA, and self-regulation, there has been a considerable cultural change in the church/station relationship. Increasingly programs are relegated to the 'very' early hours of the morning and 'spot' programming is scheduled off-peak.

Fair Dealing

The objective of ACMA is that a minimum amount of religious program matter should be broadcast during times which are accessible to the general viewing public.

Cultural Expression on Mainstream TV

ACMA believes that broadcasting has an important role to play in reflecting the expression of religious and cultural diversity within Australian society. Religion plays an important part in Australian society, and should be reflected in the medium which most Australians rely on for news, information and entertainment.

Australian Spirituality

It is important to note that religious programs provide Australian content and ensures that Australian experiences of spirituality are reflected on Australian television. Our membership seeks to reflect the thought and actions of the principal Christian religious traditions represented in Australia, recognising that these traditions are mainly, though not exclusively, Christian. We strive to present to viewers those beliefs, ideas, issues and experiences in the contemporary world which are related to a religious interpretation or dimension of life. And we hope that we meet the religious interests, concerns and needs of those on the fringe of, or outside the organised life of, the Churches.

Our Vulnerability

Like children's programs and Australian content, religious programming is vulnerable to overriding commercial imperatives and must be supported by mandatory incentives for its broadcast.

Adequate and Comprehensive Programming

Under the Act a licensee must provide a service, when considered together with other broadcasting services in the license area an adequate and comprehensive range of broadcasting services. (Sch 2, Pt 3, 7, (2) (a)).

The provision of religious programming has always been considered part of this important obligation.

As the churches do not have other television programming outlets, the Part 2 'Special Condition' applicable to commercial free-to-air television licensees is most important.

As a matter of practice the churches have been provided with adequate facilities by licensees to enable the production of programs of a high standard.

What About Community and Pay TV?

Whilst we do not deny that there is some religious content on these services it tends to be sectional and does not represent mainstream churches. This is paralleled in radio where there are many Christian radio stations around the country but none directly supported by mainstream churches. Although some of our members will produce for other services it is not their dominant activity as free-to-air commercial TV remains, and is likely to remain for some years, the major television service for the majority of Australians.

Religion in Australia Today

- 74.3% of the Australian population claims allegiance to a religious body.
- 13,199,192 million* people have some kind of religious affiliation.

Is Australia a “religious” or “secular” society?

Most Australians reflect on deep questions and are looking for meaning and purpose in their lives. Australia is not strictly a “secular” nation because the majority of people have a religious dimension to their lives.

Who Goes to Church

Historically Australia has never been a great “church-going” nation. However today 1.5 million people, 15yrs + are in church every Sunday.

What about Religions other than Christianity?

- 74% * Christian, 2.6 % * Other.

Conclusion

While many Australians may not be traditionally religious, Australia is certainly not a totally secular society. Religious questions and values are important. Their forms of expression are undergoing change. However, research indicates that it is a significant factor in most people’s lives.*

*** 1996 Census.**

Summary

- ACMA members represent the churches that constitute 70%+ of the Australian population.
- ACMA members work in the field of religious television production supplying programming for commercial television.
- ACMA members rely on airtime and facilities provided by commercial TV stations and networks under a provision as outlined in the BSA, and relationships between stations and churches established over many years.
- ACMA member's programs or telespots are provided under the standard conditions in Schedule 2, part 3, 7 (2) (C) of the Broadcasting Services Act, 1992.
- ACMA members need a regulatory direction in order for stations to provide this programming service.
- ACMA members provide Australian content and represent Australian spirituality.
- ACMA members represent a diversity of religious viewpoints.
- ACMA co-operates with stations and networks to comply with programming requirements.
- ACMA acknowledges the right of other religious groups, Christian and non-Christian to broadcasting access.