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STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

We are a combined group of Christians from different denominations who work in various media outlets and are concerned that the family values so basic to the good of our society are not being actively promoted in the present climate within the broadcasting industry.

At the moment we are in the process of forming an official organization called United Family Television.

We would like to comment on your Draft Report recently released on the Broadcasting industry and address our comments with this purpose in mind.

INTRODUCTION

The fundamental tenant of the Australian Broadcasting Policy is to "harness the power of the media to do good and limit it's power to do bad for the community."

(Section 2 page 9 of the Issues Paper-March 1999)

It is our opinion that this tenant in not adequately considered and consciously addressed by programmers in the broadcasting industry at the present time. We would like to address the issues this raises and suggest positives alternatives.

CONTENTS

Our comment is divided into five sections.

Section 1 will focus on the areas given in the original terms of reference and how we perceive them.

Section 2 will put forward our opinion on some of the draft recommendations that particularly concern us.

Section 3 will address issues raised in Section 10 of the Report, the Codes of Practice and Compliance.

Section 4 will cover the just some of the needs of families today and how these can be actively addressed. We will give some statistics to support this and offer a positive alternative.

Section 1

In the Issues paper (Section 2.2) you state that you are seeking to 'identify the nature and magnitude of the social and economic problems that broadcasting legislation seeks to address , clarify its objectives and pay particular attention to balancing the social, cultural and economic dimensions of the public interest.'

We are of the opinion that in the present programming structure, the social cultural and economic dimensions of public interest are not sufficiently balanced or responsive to audience needs, and is particularly lacking in the area of having a high standard of ethical and family programs.

In the Overview of the Draft Report you comment that the 'small number of stations has limited diversity in programming particularly commercial television'. We would agree with this statement as there is certainly a lack of well made family type programs that focus on issues of concern to families, and promote positive life values as well as uplift the human spirit. There are very few programs which could be said to be uplifting and give hope and encouragement.

In an industry pressured by time and financial constraints, the fostering of an overly competitive market can result in a lower standard of programs in a bid to stay cost effective

This results in an overabundance of American shows which have a significant following among young people. These are cheap to buy and are not always good family viewing in early evening timeslots, with their somewhat questionable values. (Eg Seinfeld and Friends where selfishness is portrayed as a virtue and some of the law and police shows where violence is acceptable behaviour)

We believe with other participants in the enquiry that television has the most significant degree of influence in shaping community views in Australia.

The power of television is demonstrated by the statistic given in the overview of the Draft Report. If 99% of homes have a television set and the average viewing time is 20 hours per week then we can assume that television has an influence on the views of people who watch it in all social, political , moral and religious areas.

Advertising statistics support this view. \$234 million is spent in a one year period on broadcasting advertising. If advertisers are spending such a significant amount they surely believe in the power of this medium to influence people in how they spend their money.

You state in the overview of the that for a significant portion of the population television is the major source of news as well so the power it has in shaping opinions of local, national and world events is heightened by the practice of agenda setting in all the major news services.

We therefore agree with the comments in Section 2 'that free to air television is presumed to have the most influence.' (Section 2, Structure of Australian Broadcasting, p.46)

For this reason we support and increase in a the more positive, upbuilding type of program, and believe that a channel allocated to this type of family programming would particularly efficient use of the spectrum for the good of the whole community.

The growing levels of violence, crime and drugs in our community plus the breakdown of family units and support systems to help cope with crisis, whether it be death, divorce, raising teenagers etc, can all be addressed in a more positive way through good television. So much more can be done to 'harness the power to do good' using television to focus on the many social problems families have.

Section 2

This section addresses some of the draft recommendations that particularly concern us.

4.6

In the recommendation concerning broadcasting licences and spectrum allocation discussed in Section 4 we would like to see an addition to Draft Recommendation 4.6.

As well as reserved spectrum for national, community and indigenous broadcasters we suggest an addition of reserved spectrum for a family community channel based on Christian values.

If, before any of the unreserved spectrum is made available for commercial use, we believe spectrum should be allocated to a Family Community Channel. This would constitute a more efficient use of the spectrum for public use and would be in keeping with the objectives of the Broadcasting Services Act.

4.8

We strongly agree with Draft Recommendation 4.8 'that the ABA should retain responsibility for issuing licences to broadcast'. Although we know that the licensing process take time and effort we believe that considering the limited manpower of the ABA, it does a good job in taking the time and trouble to examine the aspirants. We believe it is the only organisation that has the capacity to act with integrity and give a fair and unbiased decision in such a merit based selection system.

8.1

In relation to Draft recommendation 8.1, we agree that without foreign investment it will be difficult for Australia to move all the way forward into digital broadcasting, but before this happens we would like to see the community licences allocated first.

Section 3

This part of our submission will examine some of the issues raised in Section 10 of the Draft Report, the Codes of Practice and Compliance.

Given the nature of broadcasting itself, we feel the objectives of the Broadcasting Services Act are difficult to encourage, especially the following clauses:

- s) encouraging broadcasters to be responsive to the need for a fair and accurate coverage of matters of public interest.
- g) to respect community standards in the provision of program material.
- h) encouraging means of addressing complaints about broadcasting services.

We see that there is a need to establish a balance between the competing objectives of 'freedom of expression' and 'potentially harmful consequences'. (Section 10) The provision for a means to broadcast positive family programs will achieve this balance.

Just the fact that there are ten separate codes of practice registered, makes the breaches of the code difficult to enforce. (Box 10.3 p. 247)

We also agree that as 'services proliferate the ability of any regulator to monitor the content of each service diminishes'. it seems that the co-regulatory system is the only way to go in the future to regulate broadcasting influence unless there is a massive injection of funds and manpower to enable the ABA to handle the work.

We share the concern of those participants worried that the current co-regulatory system is not achieving its objectives and believe that the adoption of a standard consultation process would help this. As shown in Box 10.5 p.254 the complaints procedure seems to be a very complicated process and could be daunting to the average person.

In view of this consideration we fully support the Festival of Light in their suggestion for a voicemail system for oral complaints. We would further add that it would be good to see a log tape made of every complaint and handed regularly to the ABA from each broadcaster.

Your statement that 'one defence against stereotyping is to have sufficient diversity of programming to provide multiple viewpoints' is particularly applicable to us in an industry that often presents the family Christian viewpoint as irrelevant for today.

A family community channel would achieve this aim of providing a voice for church groups that can be source of hope and support for families.

The issue of fair and accurate coverage remains a difficult issue in an industry where agenda setting, framing stories with a specific slant, and competitive news value is of the utmost importance. We therefore agree that Draft recommendation

10.4

is particularly

important as a deterrent to inaccurate coverage.

Section 4

In this section we will cover needs that we perceive to be important to society that are not being adequately catered for by the industry.

There is no question that the family in whatever form it takes, whether single parents, blended families, couples and children are finding it increasingly difficult to cope in today's world.

Every person in Australia belongs to or comes from a family, so it follows that the problems that affect the quality of family life impacts on every individual and on society as a whole.

The House of Representatives Standing committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs has recently handed down their report into marriage and marriage breakdown in Australia.

According to the findings the direct cost of divorce to the Australian community is \$3 billion per year. Indirect costs were \$6 billion. They commented that "when personal and emotional trauma involved is added to these figures the cost to the nation is enormous."

The report called for additional funding for pre-marriage education and for marriage counselling. A family channel can help address these needs by appropriate programming.

Although because of our Christian ethic, we would support couples to stay together, we do recognise that Christians are not immune from this misfortune and one of our goals would be to help people to cope with such a crisis in their lives.

Other issues we would initially want to target are handling death and loss, drugs, depression, alcoholism, sexual abuse, raising children and gambling just to name a few. We would like to provide programs that meet people at their point of need in a helpful way and give them hope and inspiration to strive for healing in all areas of their life.

The Australian Family Association has already stated it wants to be heavily involved in programming, and there are already many resources from various church service groups already involved in this work.

CONCLUSION

We believe that we have shown a need for a Community Family Channel and that the allocation of Spectrum for this Channel based on Christian values would re-dress the current imbalance in the industry created by a lack of good positive family programs . Such a decision would be in accordance with the Objectives of the Broadcasting Services Act and a particularly efficient use of the spectrum.

Thank you
Yours sincerely,

Committee for the United Family Channel.

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Alan Cadman: Member for Castle Hill.

The following groups have given their support to our Committee and are interested in participating to a significant extent in the future.

Australian Family Association
Christian Television Association
Indigneous Christian Media
Lutheran Media Association
Anglican Media
Hills Christian Life Centre
Christian City Church
Wesley Mission
Catholic Communications Greenwich
United Christian Broadcasters