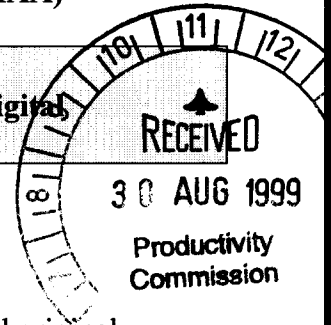




National Indigenous Media Association of Australia

To: The Productivity Commission
For: Review into the Broadcasting Services Act of 1992
From: The National Indigenous Media Association of Australia (NIMAA)

Re: Remote Area Satellite Conversion Process from analogue to digital



Dear Commissioners

As requested, please find a written overview of issues faced by Remote Aboriginal Communities, Homelands, Outstations and Organisations during the Digital Satellite Conversion Process 1997 - 1999.

Recommendations:

To overcome the concerns as detailed below, NIMAA and/or the ICA could facilitate an important role for government bodies in the introduction and acceptance of new communication technologies to remote Indigenous Communities by:

1. Ensuring Indigenous Organisations are given adequate notice of the introduction of new technologies and the process of implementation

This improved process will allow the additional costs of implementing any new technology to be included in Organisational budgets and funding applications ensuring an adequately resourced transition.

2. Providing advice regarding Community boundaries that exist in remote regions of Australia ensuring Community, family and language groups are not divided due to State, Territory or other artificial boundaries. Evolving the philosophy of cultural boundaries as defining factors

History and Concerns – An Overview of Issues

Primarily, little or no advance notice was given to Indigenous Australia to adequately budget all costs associated with the conversion process. If coordinated during mid of 1997 it would have allowed time for provision in to 1997/1998 recurrent budgets and/or grant submissions.

With two satellite carriers for Australia, concern was raised over the continuity and compatability of the new Integrated Receiver Decoding (IRD) hardware. Carriers created

**NATIONAL INDIGENOUS MEDIA
ASSOCIATION OF AUSTRALIA**

ACN: 059 430 385

P. O. BOX 109

FORTITUDE VALLEY Q 4006
AUSTRALIA

Int'l Ph: +61 7 3252 1588 Fax: +61 7 3252 7566



a monopoly for a limited number of IRD manufacturers which narrowed the choice for people when setting up their new digital system.

Furthermore, process costs exceeded expectations due to the design and functionality of the new digital IRD hardware. Re-scheduling the roll out timeframes for the digital platform impacted on both Community users and technical service agencies.

The new items provide a scaled down capacity for carriage in comparison to the analogue IRD. This resulted in reduced service options and additional cost to sustain the existing services and initiate new services as multiple hardware units were often required.

The Secretariat of the Remote Telecommunications Infrastructure Fund (RTIF) and the Remote Area Broadcasting Services (RABS) stated that the conversion process would provide the same level of service delivery that existed as at November of 1997, and with subsidy, minimal costs would be incurred.

Given the scaled down capacity for carriage, Indigenous Organisations, Community Council's and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission have had to purchase multiple digital IRD's simply to provide a service acceptable to remote Community life.

Redundancy of any new digital satellite receival equipment became another cost to Indigenous Australia. Little consideration was given to the issues of redundancy given potential failure rates of new technology.

Mechanisms for disseminating the Commonwealth's Conversion Project information to all remote satellite receivers, such as mailouts, meant many Non-English Speakers were greatly disadvantaged. Information was often lost, withheld at the nearest remote GPO and contained complex English wording, inappropriate to the sensitivities of isolated Communities and their residents.

Delays were experienced receiving digital hardware because the Satellite Registration Process did not provide sufficient scope to forecast the exact numbers of IRDs needed by individual Communities. More digital units were required than the National Order allowed due to multiple IRD configurations under the digital domain.

Under the Australian Broadcasting Authority and Commonwealth legislation, there are defined broadcast boundaries for the RABS, which coincide with State and Territory boundaries or borders. In terms of appropriate provision of broadcast services these colonial borders of the nineteenth century are completely inappropriate in recognising the true cultural, family and language groupings that exist in Central and Western Desert regions.

For example, under the new digital platform, the people and Communities of the Ngaanyatjarra Lands whose residence is in the State of Western Australia cannot legally receive Imparja Television's satellite service. Imparja Television is the only licenced

Indigenous Remote Area Broadcaster catering for family, language and cultural networks overlapping the three borders of Western Australia, South Australia and the Northern Territory.

Disappointingly, the combination of these factors resulted in a low level of Community understanding and participation throughout the entire conversion process. Organisers overlooked community consultations, research and administrative sensitivities. Costs impacted enormously on Community and Regional budgets leaving Regional Plans with little, if any, perceived increase in service provision.

NIMAA and the ICA hopes the Commission find this information of use and wish you the very best in the presentation of the Productivity Commission's findings.

Yours in communication



Jim Remedio
Chairman



Toni Janke
CEO

On behalf of the NIMAA Executive and National BRACS Working Party of 1999

17th August 1999