

Inquiry into radio racing services – a people's inquiry

When in July 1999 the House of Representatives Committee on Communications, Transport and the Arts advertised its inquiry into the impact of the decision by the ABC to discontinue its radio racing service, it expected a fairly limited response. To its surprise, within days of the advertisements appearing in leading metropolitan and regional papers in each state, submissions starting pouring in from regional and rural areas across Australia.

Although all members of the community are able to make submissions to inquiries conducted by House of Representatives committees, the vast majority of submissions come from professional and industrial organisations, government departments, community groups and academics. What is distinctive about the inquiry into radio racing services is the number of submissions from private citizens.

Of the 200 or so submissions received, a significant proportion are from ordinary people who have been personally affected by the ABC's decision. Adversely affected, as they make very clear. Generally hand written, often on scraps of yellowing paper with a cut out copy of the advertisement pinned to the corner, they are passionate protests at having lost a service very dearly valued. From the names it is apparent that the majority are from men, many of them identifying themselves as senior citizens. In addition to the submissions, the committee has also received approximately 200 form letters and a petition with 500 signatories.

Although the committee has received a number of substantial submissions from broadcasters and key bodies in the racing industry, many of the submissions, particularly those from private citizens, are short and to the point – the point being, in most cases, that racing enthusiasts can no longer listen to the races on Saturday afternoons and public holidays on ABC radio, a practice that they may have followed for the last twenty years and more.

According to many of the submissions, racing is part of the culture of Australia, particularly in the outback, and listening to the ABC radio race broadcasts had become a traditional Saturday afternoon pursuit. Submissions reflect not only loss and outrage at the decision but also bemusement. The sentiment expressed by one submitter in Western Australia is typical. 'The beauty of having a broadcast you can hear is that you can place your bets then go home and listen to them on the radio and be with the family ...

Now twenty years on we can't even hear them. They call that progress. We can land a man on the moon but we can't hear a race.' In a similar vein, a racing enthusiast from regional New South Wales describes coverage in country areas as having been 'better when I was a kid, thirty odd years ago! It is the New Millennium, with computers, mobile phones, jets, space shuttles, digital this and that and I still can't listen to a bloody race.' There is a sense of it being, for many submitters, the first time that they have participated in a parliamentary committee inquiry process. So what has prompted people to take this step?

'We can land a man on the moon but we can't hear a race'

On 30 June 1998, the ABC discontinued its regional broadcasts of horse races. The broadcasts, at the time of the decision, were part of the ABC's Grandstand program on Saturday afternoons and public holidays.

According to the ABC, its decision was primarily a programming decision taken to better accommodate the needs of its broader regional audience. Citing research conducted by an arm of ABC Audience Research known as MediaScan, the ABC claims its regional audience has little interest in horse racing and a strong interest in major sports such as cricket and various football codes. In making its decision to discontinue the service, the ABC claims to have taken into account the availability of alternative sources of racing information including narrowcast licences, commercial and community radio, subscription and free-to-air television as well as online services.

Most submissions from private citizens reject the suggestion that adequate alternative services are available. Although radio racing broadcasters are extending their coverage by purchasing narrowcast licences, the reach of such licences is limited with people residing more than a few kilometres away from the transmitters often unable to pick up any signal at all. Vast tracts of the country are so affected.

The existence of alternatives such as pay TV and online services is acknowledged in the submissions but generally appraised as being an inadequate substitute for the free-to-air radio race broadcasts.

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In describing the importance of access to radio race broadcasts, submitters stress the portability of radio and its utility for country life and its demands. Many are unwilling or unable to spend time in front of the television on a Saturday afternoon or find the prospect of sitting in a TAB outlet in a hotel unattractive, if indeed impractical.

There are other points of disparity between the ABC's perceptions and those of regional ABC listeners as revealed in submissions. In contrast to the praise lavished on the ABC's radio coverage of the races by most of the private citizens who made submissions, the ABC's own submission describes the program quality of the broadcasts as being well below the ABC's desired standard.

A number of submissions have suggested that the privatisation of the state TABs and the consequent inability of the ABC to continue accepting contributions from them towards the racing service was a key factor in the ABC's decision. The ABC, however, claims that funding was not a significant factor in its decision and that the impact of the privatisation of the TABs was on the timing of the decision.

In addition to examining the value placed on the ABC's regional racing service and the impact of its discontinuation, the terms of reference direct the committee to inquire into the current extent of radio racing coverage and future options for the provision of broadcasting services of racing in regional Australia. It is predominantly these aspects of the inquiry that have been the focus of submissions from organisations.

Radio broadcasting services dedicated to racing have described the efforts they are making to expand their coverage to regional areas. This has been principally through the purchase of narrowcast licences as they are made available through the Australian Broadcasting Authority's Local Area Planning process. In describing such efforts, racing broadcasters have been consistent in their view that changes need to be made to the current licensing regime. In particular, they have called for changes that will give them greater certainty of tenure and protection of the considerable investment involved in expanding coverage. There is more than a strong hint that without such changes, the level of existing coverage in regional areas is itself threatened. There are also calls for the creation for a new racing broadcast licence.

There is less consistency within the industry about the appropriate role for the ABC in delivering radio race broadcasts. 2KY, for instance, states clearly that its service 'adequately satisfies the

needs of racing enthusiasts in New South Wales' and that there is 'no need for the ABC to resume its racing service.' In contrast to this view, the WA TAB (holder of a number of open narrowcast and low power open narrowcast licences) considers that only the national broadcaster can solve the problem of providing vast areas in country WA with a radio racing service. Taking a slightly different tack, Sport 927 (Victoria) has suggested that as the 'ABC simulcasts its Saturday and public holiday afternoon sports program on both AM and FM channel in Gippsland, North East District and Western District, they [the ABC] could take Sport 927 race broadcasts on either the AM or FM channel, thus alleviating any annoyance to listeners who do not wish to listen to race broadcasters.' The station has offered to provide to the ABC, at no cost, race broadcasts to be relayed through either their AM or FM stations.'

'only the national broadcaster can solve the problem in country WA'

Submissions from private citizens are also strongly in favour of the restoration of the ABC's regional racing services. At issue here is whether the ABC's charter, which requires it to 'contribute to a sense of national identity, inform and entertain Australians and reflect the cultural diversity of the Australian community', implies any obligation to maintain services such as its racing service in the absence of adequate alternatives.

In addition to the submissions received from across Australia, the committee has taken evidence at public hearings in Brisbane, Sydney, Canberra and Melbourne and at a public round table discussion in Barraba, New South Wales. It has heard from the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, the Australian Broadcasting Authority, State TABs, racing broadcasters, the Australian Racing Board, various racing councils and individuals.

Further information about the inquiry can be obtained from the committee's web site at www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/cta/index.htm or from the Inquiry Secretary, Janet Connaughton, on (02) 6277 4601.