

Review of the Viewer Access Satellite Television (VAST) Service



Response of the Indigenous Remote Communications Association



Bidyadanga WA RIBS (BRACS) with multiple generations of satellite radio receiving infrastructure

IRCA acknowledges the traditional custodians of the lands on which we work. We pay respect to Elders past, present and emerging.

June 2018

This submission is made by the Indigenous Remote Communications Association (IRCA) following sector consultation. It is expected that some radio services, RIBS and RIMOs will make individual submissions in which case the IRCA Submission should not be taken to displace those submissions.

About the Indigenous Remote Communications Association

The Indigenous Remote Communications Association (IRCA) is the peak body for Indigenous media and communications. It was founded in 2001 as the peak body for remote Indigenous media and communications. In late 2016 it transitioned to the national peak body for First Nations broadcasting, media and communications.

Up to 105 Remote Indigenous Broadcasting Services (RIBS), 33 additional licensed retransmission sites across Australia, 8 Remote Indigenous Media Organisations (RIMOs) and 28 urban and regional First Nations radio services are eligible for representation by IRCA.

About the First Nations broadcasting and media sector

First Nations broadcasters are not-for-profit community organisations providing a primary and essential service to their communities. They reach nearly 50% of the Australian Aboriginal

and Torres Strait Islander population, but are prevented from providing a primary radio service to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples due to a lack of funding.

First Nations broadcasters and media producers also connect non-Indigenous communities with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and culture, developing greater understanding and building stronger relationships.

The sector:

- Comprises:
 - Radio services able to reach around 320,000 First Nations people, including around 100,000 very hard to reach people in remote Indigenous

communities, or approximately 47% of the First Nations population.

- Sixteen (16) First Nations radio services rebroadcast through the VAST service to around 180 terrestrial rebroadcast sites.
- A wide range of First Nations news and current affairs services including:
 - National Indigenous Radio Service (NIRS) and its National Indigenous News Service and Weekly News-in-Review
 - Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association's news service, including its Strong Voices program.
 - Local radio news services, including Koori Radio's news and current affairs programming
 - NITV News and Living Black
 - Print and online media including Koori Mail, First Nations Telegraph, Land Rights News
- A regional satellite TV service reaching 240,000 remote households and a free to air national TV service.
- Over 230 radio broadcast sites across Australia.
- Is a multimillion dollar industry with over 35 First Nations community owned and managed not-for-profit media organisations.
- Holds the capacity to be a preferred supplier for all government messaging to our communities.
- Is the most relevant and appropriate service with the highest listenership, community engagement and local ownership of all media services.
- Is delivered in the first language of many remote peoples.
- In remote communities, is the most reliable and ubiquitous radio and media services.

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IRCA Recommendations

That the Australian Government:

1. Recognise that Internet provision in remote Indigenous communities is not available in sufficient capacity to replace the VAST satellite service.
2. Recognise that the NBN Skymuster service is likely to become congested and that additional streaming, or on demand services, will detrimentally affect current provision.
3. Recognise that in places where there may be some, or a growing, Internet capacity for radio or TV streaming service access, that the generally poor socio-economic position of remote Indigenous community residents does not make it economically feasible for those residents to maintain appropriate Internet plans or to obtain new viewing technologies, creating an inequity in access to free-to-air TV and radio.
4. Renew the VAST service for a minimum additional 5 years, with an option to renew for another 5 years where the service provider performance is at the required standard.
5. Require the service provider to make bandwidth efficiencies, mindful that improved transmission codecs need to be compatible with the existing fleet infrastructure and receiver technologies.
6. Allow for additional VAST channels for First Nations broadcasters, especially those that are well placed to provide terrestrial rebroadcast in areas with significant First Nations populations, and currently without an available terrestrial First Nations radio service.
7. In response to failures in the Direct to Home (DTH) implementations of VAST in remote Indigenous communities:
 - a. Fund a Repair and Maintenance program for remote Indigenous communities to deal with receiver, smartcard and satellite dish failures.

- b. Include in the Repair and Maintenance Program a system for remote Indigenous community members to obtain, on an ongoing basis, replacement set-top boxes at a cost that does not reflect price gouging.
 - c. Fund an expansion program in remote Indigenous communities to address the gaps in DTH provision for remote houses built since the initial digital switchover program.
 - d. Fund a community education program, in Aboriginal languages and English, for delivery on VAST First Nations radio and TV on how to apply for VAST and how smartcards work, including how to have them reactivated.
8. Investigate the quality of service of reception in Northern Australia in relation to rain fade and geographic location issues, and implement a rollout of larger satellite dishes where the quality of service indicators are below acceptable standards.
9. To ensure a reliable and ubiquitous radio service is available to First Nations community members in remote Indigenous communities, and as a matter of civic participation, that funding be provided for the:
- a. *Ongoing operational costs* of terrestrial rebroadcast via VAST, of a relevant First Nations radio service in ACMA specified remote Indigenous communities where a Remote Indigenous Broadcasting Service is not already in place; and
 - b. *Rollout of terrestrial rebroadcast equipment* of a relevant First Nations radio service in ACMA designated remote Indigenous communities that do not already have such a facility.
10. First Nations radio and TV services on VAST be maintained as nationally available services.



1. Introduction: background and importance of the VAST satellite service for First Nations broadcasting

Satellite TV and radio services have been an integral part of First Nations broadcasting services since their development in the 1970s. Initially seen as a threat, satellite delivery is now the backbone of First Nations broadcasting in remote and regional Australia.

Remote First Nations peoples mobilised to demand their own media in the lead up to the launch of AUSSAT in 1985 that would bring TV to remote Australia for the first time. That demand was aimed at guarding young First Nations people from being swamped by AUSSAT delivered western media, and consequently losing their culture and language.

The Broadcasting for Remote Aboriginal Communities Scheme (BRACS) resulted from the mobilisation, with around 80 communities initially provided, in the late 1980s, with broadcasting equipment supplied for locally produced TV and radio broadcasts. BRACS technology also enabled local communities to switch off, as needed for cultural and social reasons, the retransmission of non-Indigenous free to air TV and radio in their communities.

Importantly, the mobilisation of First Nations people around AUSSAT also saw the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA) form Imparja and bid successfully in 1985 for management of the AUSSAT delivered Remote Commercial Television Service (RCTS). Imparja's mission was the provision of more locally relevant TV content and especially Aboriginal content. Imparja continues to deliver the Imparja TV service as well as providing a range of satellite delivery services for First Nations broadcasters.

In 1989, satellite became the carrier of First Nations radio to remote communities for the first time beginning with the deployment of CAAMA's 8KIN radio service on AUSSAT for rebroadcasting in remote communities.

The establishment of the 8 Remote Indigenous Media Organisations (RIMOs)¹ in the mid 1990s as coordinating organisations for BRACS in designated geographic regions, saw RIMO radio services delivered via satellite as regional radio services. The regional RIMO radio services are an aggregation of local BRACS (now called Remote Indigenous Broadcasting Services (RIBS)) radio shows supplemented by RIMO produced content. The radio content is sent as a RIMO radio stream, via IP codecs, to Imparja for uploading to Optus satellite services. The RIMO radio service is then rebroadcast via satellite to the communities in the RIMO footprint, including some communities without a RIBS itself.

The RIMO radio “hub and spoke” and satellite rebroadcast model has proved an effective, robust and reliable delivery model for remote First Nations radio broadcasting. There is a very significant equipment and infrastructure base in remote communities installed for this delivery model.

The RIMO radio services continue to be delivered via the VAST service through Direct to Home implementations as well as through terrestrial rebroadcast to around 120 sites.

Another 4 remote First Nations radio broadcasters plus a Darwin based First Nations radio broadcaster, also use the VAST service (and its predecessors) to rebroadcast over multiple sites.

Regionally, the First Nations TV service, Indigenous Community Television (ICTV) is delivered via the VAST on Channel 601. Established in 2001, ICTV’s mission is to sustain and strengthen culture and language through delivery of community-generated TV

¹ **Central Australian Media Association** (based in Alice Springs; coordinates 14 remote Arrente community media services), **Ngaanyatjarra Media** (based in Irrunytju WA; coordinates 14 remote Ngaanyatjaa Lands remote community media services), **Pilbara and Kimberley Media Association** (based in Broome; coordinates 12 Pilbara and Kimberley remote community media services); **Pintupi Anmatyerre Warlpiri Media** (based in Yuendumu NT; coordinates 14 remote Tanami area community media services); **Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjattjara Media** (based in Umuwa; coordinates 7 APY Lands remote community media services); **Queensland Remote Aboriginal Media** (based in Cairns QLD; coordinates 12 remote Far North Queensland community media services); **Top End Aboriginal Bush Broadcasting Association** (based in Darwin; coordinates 30 remote Top End community media services); **Torres Strait Islander Media Association** (based in Thursday Island; coordinated 15 remote Torres Strait community media services).

content. It has strong audience engagement and is a vital part of First Nations broadcasting.

Nationally, the National Indigenous Radio Service (NIRS) is carried on the VAST service as is National Indigenous Television (NITV).

From initially being perceived as a threat, satellite delivery is now an essential component of delivery of remote, regional and national First Nations radio and TV services. It has a valuable and substantial technology base that is professionally maintained to ensure quality broadcasting delivery to remote and regional First Nations audiences. The roll out of IP services to remote and regional Australia has not yet provided an alternative and reliable delivery channel that is able to replace satellite delivery.

IRCA sees satellite delivery as being the only ubiquitous and reliable delivery technology option for First Nations broadcasting in remote areas for at least another decade.



2. Response

2.1 Feedback on VAST

2.1.1 In what ways is the VAST service appropriate for delivery of television in areas without reliable terrestrial coverage?

Satellite TV and radio delivery is the **only** reliable delivery technology for remote Australia. There has been no rollout of alternative broadcasting technologies that are able to replicate the reach, or the required and non-congested bandwidth for TV and radio delivery.

The inclusion of a wide range of public, community and commercial TV and radio services on VAST provides for equitable access to such services for remote and regional audiences in VAST eligible areas.

Reliable terrestrial rebroadcast of TV **had** been achieved in BRACS/RIBS sites prior to the implementation of VAST. However, the analog to digital switchover that accompanied the VAST deployment, saw those terrestrial rebroadcast sites decommissioned as a result of a lack of funding to remote First Nations broadcasters to migrate their TV services to digital transmission. IRCA draws attention to its past representations to Government to fund digital migration of local RIBS TV services to provide for reliability in remote Indigenous communities, given the vulnerability of the Direct-to-Home technologies used to receive VAST services.

Recommendations

IRCA recommends that the Australian Government:

- 1. Recognise that Internet provision in remote Indigenous communities is not available in sufficient capacity to replace the VAST satellite service.**
- 2. Recognise that the NBN Skymuster service is likely to become congested and that additional streaming, or on demand services, will detrimentally affect current provision.**

3. **Recognise that in places where there may be some, or a growing, Internet capacity for radio or TV streaming service access, that the generally poor socio-economic position of remote Indigenous community residents does not make it economically feasible for those residents to maintain appropriate Internet plans or to obtain new viewing technologies, creating an inequity in access to free-to-air TV and radio.**
4. **Renew the VAST service for a minimum additional 5 years, with an option to renew for another 5 years where the service provider performance is at the required standard.**

2.1.2 Are the current range of TV and radio services offered appropriate?

In general, the current range is appropriate. However, there is a need to provide additional channels for First Nations radio services to enable unserved First Nations communities to have access to a local or regionally relevant First Nations radio service. There are areas in VAST eligible areas in NSW, Victoria, South Australia and Queensland that would benefit from being able to re-broadcast a relevant radio service from First Nations radio services already established in those states/regions. Receiving technologies could either be at the household direct-to-home level or, where there is capacity from the First Nations radio service, through terrestrial rebroadcast.

It is suggested that there may be bandwidth efficiencies through new codecs that may open up the possibility for spare capacity for additional channels. The selection of new codecs of course needs to take into account the existing fleet's technologies to ensure that technology migration of existing set-top boxes and professional receivers in retransmission facilities is not required.

Recommendations

IRCA recommends that the Australian Government:

5. **Require the service provider to make bandwidth efficiencies mindful that improved transmission codecs need to be compatible with the existing fleet infrastructure and receiver technologies.**
6. **Allow for additional VAST channels for First Nations broadcasters, especially for those that are well placed to provide for terrestrial rebroadcast in areas with significant First Nations populations, and currently without an available terrestrial First Nations radio service.**

2.1.3 To what extent are VAST set-top boxes meeting the needs of viewers?

There is a significant issue with the set-top-boxes due to their vulnerability to damage, especially in remote Indigenous communities. This is complicated by the installation of boxes as part of the DTH rollout that saw boxes placed on floors, perched on chairs, etc. Furnishings in the multi-family household situation of many remote Indigenous communities are sparse and often damaged.

The easy removal of smartcards means that they easily go missing. There is often a misunderstanding that smartcards are transferrable to other set-top boxes and when that proves to fail the smartcards and/or set-to-boxes are seen to be faulty and thrown out.

There is price gouging in some communities with the supply of replacement set-top boxes at more than double the cost price, exacerbated by the generally lower socio-economic status of remote Indigenous communities.

The use of domestic receivers, as well as standard size satellite dishes, can cause issues in the Top End where the wet season can cause extended and multiple instances of rain fade with set top boxes reverting back to the Optus help channel. Some improvements have been made by Optus in addressing this. However, the size of the installed satellite dishes in the Top End is part of the issue.

IRCA's 2016 Remote Indigenous Communications and Media Survey² found that 1/3 of households in remote Indigenous communities do not have an operational DTH installation. Some communities report more than 50% of houses without operational DTH equipment. In part, this is also due to new housing provision in remote Indigenous communities following the DTH rollout in those communities.

There is a need to provide back-up terrestrial rebroadcast of at least First Nations radio services in remote Indigenous communities to address the failure of the DTH technologies.

² See <https://www.irca.net.au/projects/indigenous-communications-and-media-survey-2016>

Recommendations

IRCA recommends that the Australian Government:

- 7. In response to failures in the Direct to Home (DTH) implementations of VAST in remote Indigenous communities:**
 - a. Fund a Repair and Maintenance program for remote Indigenous communities to deal with receiver, smartcard and satellite dish failures.**
 - b. Include in the Repair and Maintenance Program a system for remote Indigenous community members to obtain, on an ongoing basis, replacement set-top boxes at a cost that does not reflect price gouging.**
 - c. Fund an expansion program in remote Indigenous communities to address the gaps in DTH provision for remote houses built since the initial digital switchover program.**
 - d. Fund a community education program, in Aboriginal languages and English, for delivery on VAST First Nations radio and TV on how to apply for VAST and how smartcards work, including how to have them reactivated.**
- 8. Investigate the quality of service of reception in Northern Australia in relation to rain fade and geographic location issues, and implement a rollout of larger satellite dishes where the quality of service indicators are below acceptable standards.**
- 9. To ensure a reliable and ubiquitous radio service is available to First Nations community members in remote Indigenous communities, and as a matter of civic participation, that funding be provided for the:**
 - a. *Ongoing operational costs* of terrestrial rebroadcast via VAST, of a relevant First Nations radio service in ACMA specified remote Indigenous communities where a Remote Indigenous Broadcasting Service is not already in place; and**
 - b. *Rollout of terrestrial rebroadcast equipment* of a relevant First Nations radio service in ACMA designated remote Indigenous communities that do not already have such a facility.**

2.1.4 To what extent do the regional commercial news arrangements on VAST meet the needs of viewers?

Within the context of commercial news, needs are met satisfactorily. *Imparja News* provides an effective regional focus and is a training ground for young news readers. There is an overall issue of the dominance of metro news that is outside the scope of a response in this review.

2.1.5 Specifically, how could the current VAST service be improved?

As per our responses above.

2.2 Changes in the media landscape—2010 to now

2.2.1 How has the increasing availability of online TV content changed the way viewers access and consume content in areas unable to receive terrestrial FTA TV transmission?

It is clear that audiences are choosing to consume TV and radio using a multiplicity of receiving devices as well as time shifting. However, the capacity of remote Indigenous community members to move to online TV and radio is reduced significantly by:

- Lack of adequate, non-congested IP bandwidth.
- Lack of landlines where ADSL is available.
- Low socio-economic status with affordability of both the ISP service and IP based receiving devices as key challenges.
- Indigenous digital literacy challenges.
- Multi-family households – who pays for the ISP plan?

Recommendations

See Recommendations 1 to 4.

2.3 Changes in technology and distribution networks

2.3.1 To what extent should future delivery models allow flexibility to utilise new technology to provide access to terrestrial television services?

We have already noted the need for terrestrial rebroadcast of First Nations radio in remote Indigenous communities to address DTH failures in such communities. Should adequate, non-congested, reliable and affordable broadband become available in remote Indigenous communities there may be the possibility of using IP to distribute First Nations radio services to terrestrial retransmission facilities. It is considered unlikely that bandwidth of the capacity and reliability needed for terrestrial rebroadcast TV will be available in the short or medium term in remote Indigenous communities.

2.4 Conditional Access

2.4.1 How could the process for viewers to apply for and access VAST be improved? Does the process remain appropriate?

Language barriers continue to cause issues for remote Indigenous community members. IRCA's recommendation 7d addresses this issue.

2.4.2 What are the key reasons for maintaining the conditional access arrangements beyond 2020?

First Nations radio and TV services are not subject to conditional access arrangements and are available nationally. This is appropriate given the fluid nature of First Nations peoples in terms of travel for cultural and family reasons.

Recommendation

IRCA recommends to the Australian Government that:

11. First Nations radio and TV services on VAST be maintained as nationally available services.

2.5 Funding

2.5.1 What are the main factors that would most influence industry investment in the delivery of FTA TV services in areas unable to receive a reliable terrestrial transmission? Why?

The delivery of free to air TV and radio needs to be seen in the context of a USO. Subscription services would increase economic pressures on already socio-economically disadvantaged First Nations communities.

3. Conclusion

IRCA welcomes this opportunity to respond to the VAST Service Review. We reiterate the points made in our introduction that satellite delivery is an essential component of remote, regional and national First Nations radio and TV services. It has a valuable and substantial technology base that is professionally maintained to ensure quality broadcasting delivery to remote and regional First Nations audiences. The roll out of IP services to remote and regional Australia has not yet provided an alternative and reliable delivery channel that is able to replace satellite delivery.

We see satellite delivery as being the only ubiquitous and reliable delivery technology option for First Nations broadcasting in VAST eligible areas for at least another decade. We urge the Australian Government to renew the VAST service in a timely manner that will ensure no disruption to the service.

We also urge the Government to consider codec efficiencies that may provide capacity for additional First Nations radio services.

We would appreciate further discussions on this and other recommendations in this Response.

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