Radio Prominence on Smart Speakers Proposals Paper

Submission to the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts

11 November 2024

The Community Broadcasting Foundation acknowledges the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people of the Kulin Nation, the traditional custodians of the land on which our organisation was founded. We pay our respects to all First Nations people across Australia, including those sitting at the heart of community broadcasting. We recognise and honour their enduring connection to country and community and recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as our land's first storytellers.

We acknowledge the resilience and wisdom of First Nations people, honouring Elders who have guided in the past and those who continue to inspire us today. **Always was, always will be.**

Introduction

The Community Broadcasting Foundation (CBF) has been an independent grant-maker since 1984, distributing funding provided by the Australian Government. In 2023/24, CBF provided $20.5 million in grants to support the maintenance and development of the community broadcasting sector.

Our strategy focuses on developing the capability and capacity needed to ensure a sustainable future. We prioritise long-term thinking and planning to create a resilient sector that champions inclusivity and accessibility in the media landscape. We support participation and voice that creates connection and belonging throughout our diverse community, providing grants for initiatives that create a positive impact. We also help community media organisations engage with and reflect their communities, ensuring that Australia's diverse populations have access to information, as well as cultural and local content that enriches their lives and enables active participation in community life.

The CBF welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the consultation on the proposed Radio Prominence on Smart Speakers. As a funding body with deep insight into the needs and challenges of community broadcasters, we understand the critical role community radio stations play in connecting local audiences, delivering essential emergency information, and promoting diverse media representation. In the context of our submission below, we strongly support the prominence framework's objective of ensuring unfettered access to local, free-to-air services on connected smart speaker devices, particularly in safeguarding radio stations' ability to reach and engage their audiences without being restricted by 'gateway devices'.

In this submission, we address key concerns regarding the framework, particularly the need for equitable access for community broadcasters and the importance of protecting the integrity of radio content on smart speakers. We emphasise the need to ensure that smaller broadcasters are not subject to hidden costs or financial barriers in securing prominence.

The CBF also endorses the Community Broadcasting Association of Australia (CBAA) recommendations regarding the key questions posed in this consultation, acknowledging their expertise and leadership in advocating for a future where community radio remains accessible, relevant, and prominent in the evolving media landscape.

Roadmap 2033

Advancements in technology have fundamentally transformed how media content is produced, shared, and experienced. As the media landscape continues to evolve with the rise of smart technologies, ensuring that Australian free-to-air broadcast radio remains easily accessible is crucial for the community broadcasting sector and the public it serves. The sector's role in promoting local content, fostering diversity, and strengthening community engagement has never been more important. Equal access for community radio stations is essential because:

- Community radio is essential for emergency broadcasting in rural and regional areas;

- Community radio had vital tool for cultural expression, representation and inclusivity for underrepresented communities across Australia;
- Radio is the top-choice for in-car -content with 76% listening rate over the past month;[1]
- with an explosion of international and internet audio services, it's getting harder for users to easily find Australian free-to-air radio services on smart devices.

The proposed *Prominence and Anti-Siphoning Act 2024* ('prominence legislation') seeks to protect the visibility and discoverability of Australian radio stations licensed under the Broadcasting Services Act 1992, aligning with two key objectives of the prominence framework: ensuring a level playing field and equitable access for all broadcasters, and empowering audiences with agency over when and how they consume content.

These objectives align with the community broadcasting sector's expressed strategic objective in Roadmap 2033, to secure capacity to meet community need. Specifically, that stations are supported to ensure Australians can access community broadcasting across AM/FM, DAB+, terrestrial TV, online and emerging platforms of their choice.[2] The benefits of such an approach are identified by the sector to include: access to spectrum is maintained and expanded for TV and radio, closing the digital divide and sustaining reliable access to First Nations communities in remote and regional areas, and securing funding for multiplatform distribution technology that meets evolving changes so that community broadcasting is easily found on global and local platforms.[3] A core aspect of securing capacity to meet community need under Roadmap 2033 also includes continuous monitoring of technology trends and changes ensuring we use the most appropriate technology.[4]

By prioritising licensed broadcasters, including community broadcasters in the smart speaker interface, this legislation not only enhances listener accessibility but also supports a diverse media ecosystem where audiences have free and easy access to a wide range of local services and content. Crucially, it ensures community broadcasting is supported to contribute to the collective responsibility of disaster resilience in line with local needs.[5]

These objectives directly align with the aspirations of the community broadcasting sector as expressed in *Roadmap 2033*, which envisions a sector that thrives on equitable access, fosters local engagement, and ensures community-driven content is available to all Australians. Community broadcasting represents a vital part of Australia's cultural fabric, contributing to social harmony and cohesion by building inter-community connections. The prominence framework's support for accessible, local content is a vital step in securing the future of the sector, ensuring that community radio remains a valuable resource and community and cultural asset for generations to come.

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[1] The Infinite Dial Australia (Website, accessed on 11 November 2024).
[2] Roadmap 2033: Community broadcasting's plan for greater impact in every Australian community, p.34-35.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.

Navigating platform control

The shift towards voice-assisted listening and the increasing reliance on digital platforms creates a risk for community broadcasters, who may find themselves at a disadvantage as larger digital platforms gain greater control over access to audiences. Issues with accuracy of voice assistant responses to requests for radio stations, as demonstrated by the CRA's Voice Request Audit, further highlights the potential for market fragmentation and reduced visibility for community stations.

We also recognise that while the bargaining dynamics are evolving, the broader implications for the sustainability of community broadcasting must be carefully considered. It is crucial that any regulatory measures in Australia account for the specific needs and challenges of the community radio sector to ensure ongoing access and fair representation on these emerging platforms.

Understanding the framework and managing this in a business context:

1. What resources would be required and / or costs incurred by potentially impacted parties in initially understanding the new framework and implementing new business processes and systems during the 'phase in period' (i.e. the 6 to 12 months prior to the commencement of the new legislation)?
2. What resources would be required and / or costs incurred by potentially impacted parties in complying with the framework on an ongoing, annual basis (i.e. after the initial phase in period, once the new framework has commenced)?

A likely hurdle: Ensuring Discoverability on Smart Speakers

A key prominence issue for smart speakers is the accurate surfacing of radio stations.[6] One significant hurdle in ensuring community radio stations are adequately represented and accessible on voice-assisted devices is the need for broadcasters to maintain up-to-date back-end systems. For community radio stations to be easily discoverable by listeners on smart speakers, their back-end infrastructure must be compatible with the technical requirements of digital platforms. Without this integration, there is a risk that these stations will be overlooked, or worse, inaccessible via voice commands, limiting their reach and impact.

To ensure the effectiveness of the prominence framework, it will be essential to address this issue and support community broadcasters in making the necessary ongoing technical upgrades. Only then can the framework truly guarantee that community radio remains visible and accessible in an increasingly platform-dominated audio ecosystem.

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[6] Ofcom (2022), Smart speakers research with the public research report (ofcom.org.uk), p 21-25, accessed 13 May 2024; CRA (2018), Voice Request Audit. Unpublished.

The proposed 'negotiated standards' approach, which would require regulated radio services to be technically capable of integrating with voice activation software to be afforded prominence, has the potential to create significant challenges for community broadcasters. While the approach acknowledges the technical complexity and rapid evolution of smart speaker technologies, it also sets a baseline expectation that radio stations, including community broadcasters, must meet certain integration standards to be discoverable and maintain prominence on these platforms.

However, the lack of specific regulated standards – leaving room for fixability in technical requirements – could lead to unequal access. The varying capabilities of different devices and services may disproportionately effect community broadcasters, who may have fewer resources and less technical expertise compared to larger, commercial broadcasters or digital platforms. If community stations cannot afford the necessary technological upgrades or lack the in-house expertise to meet the integration requirements, they risk being sidelined in a landscape dominated by bigger players with more advanced infrastructure.

To ensure community broadcasters are not disadvantaged in the prominence framework, they need access to technical support and training for system upgrades, financial assistance to meet integration standards, and industry collaboration to ensure fair representation in setting technical requirements. Ongoing regulatory oversight is also essential to prevent unintended barriers for smaller broadcasters. In our experience as a grant maker supporting community broadcasters, we see a significant spread of capability and capacity across the sector, which we detail with evidence in our submission to the Sustainability of the Community Broadcasting Sector Review.[7] Addressing these needs will help ensure that community radio remains visible, easily discoverable and accessible on digital platforms.

Protecting or gaining incremental listening

> **11. Would the framework support the ability of commercial and community radio stations to maintain or grow radio listening? a. If there is an expectation of audience growth, by how much would this increase?**
>
> **c. Would this enable community radio stations to increase sponsorship revenues? What is the expected value of this increase?**

Protecting the integrity of radio content on smart speakers

The CBF welcomes the intention behind requiring a regulated radio service to provide 'consistent and reliable access' or response by the voice activation software that is reasonable in the circumstances. The framework proposal acknowledges several reasons for inaccuracy in

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[7] Community Broadcasting Foundation (CBF) Submission to the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts on the '*Sustainability of the Community Broadcasting Sector Review*', p.18. <https://www.infrastructure.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/cbssr-cbf.pdf> (Accessed 11 November 2024).

surfacing Australian radio stations, including technical issues and problems that are outside the control of the provider of the voice assistant. However, we would like to highlight concerns that many community broadcasters could be unintentionally excluded or deprioritised due to their smaller scale or limited resources. In this respect, we encourage clearer guarantees for equitable prominence.

We strongly support the intention to create a prominence framework that supports reliable access to radio services on smart speakers. However, we wish to emphasise the need to ensure that smaller broadcasters such as community radio stations are not subject to any hidden costs or financial barriers in securing prominence under the new framework. Community broadcasters play a vital role in local communities, providing essential information in times of disaster as well as diverse and often underrepresented content.

In a media landscape increasingly dominated by global platforms, it becomes increasingly pertinent that local community radio be given a crucial space for the voices of Australia's many cultural, linguistic, and regional communities. Whether it's First Nations communities in remote areas, multicultural programs that reflect the rich diversity of our migrant populations, disability-focused content, or local arts and cultural initiatives, community radio ensures that diverse Australians have access to content hat reflects their lived experiences, values and identities. Discoverability of community radio stations in smart speakers and other emerging platforms is therefore not just a technical issue – it is a cultural imperative. By ensuring that community broadcasters are prominent and easily accessible on digital platforms, we ensure that all Australians have access to a rich tapestry of local Australian content, in alignment with the government's Revive Cultural Policy objectives. The CBF has observed how this content fosters connection, strengthens social cohesion, and supports a vibrant, multicultural society with the many programs we fund.

We believe it is important that the prominence framework includes robust regulatory oversight to ensure compliance with the "no cost" principle and prevent any hidden costs or financial barriers. For example, clear guidelines can ensure that voice assistant platforms are not able to impose additional costs on smaller broadcasters, either directly or indirectly and that all costs associated with prominence are equitable and transparent.

The CBF supports the proposed key design that regulated smart speaker platforms should not be allowed to alter the content of radio services, including in relation to advertising and sponsorship. This approach is essential for the protection of the integrity of radio broadcasts, ensuring that community radio services are not disadvantaged by undue interference from platforms that serve as conduits for content delivery. In this way, the framework would help to level the playing field between large and small broadcasters, while also protecting community broadcasters' ability to control their content which is central to their financial stability.

Conclusion

Broadly, the CBF welcomes the proposed prominence framework. We encourage the government to consider the unique characteristics of community broadcasting stations in the

context of an increasingly digital age, particularly given their role in public safety. As the recent bushfire inquiry underscored, local radio stations are often the last line of communication when other technologies fail, providing timely, reliable, and region-specific emergency information. Community broadcasters not only serve as vital connectors during crises but also offer a trusted, accessible voice for communities that may otherwise be overlooked in broader emergency messaging frameworks – particularly for regional and remote First Nations communities.

As the government adapts and tailors its prominence framework, it is crucial that it ensures equitable access and does not leave gaps for the possibility of hidden costs or financial barriers for smaller broadcasters. Any technical requirements for prominence must be fair and accessible, supporting community broadcasters in overcoming the digital divide. The framework must reflect the unique status of community radio, its contributions to resilience, local emergency communication and the social fabric through media diversity – ensuring that smaller broadcasters are not disadvantaged by platform control or market fragmentation.

We look forward to the government investigating issues in the future around the prominence of radio services on in car dashboards and devices to continue to allow Australians easy access to their favourite local Australian community radio services.

By doing so, we can safeguard the safety and well-being of Australians in times of crises, ensuring that no community is left without access to vital, uninterrupted content.

The CBF thanks the government for considering this perspective and urges continued support for this essential sector in a rapidly evolving digital space. We also encourage the government's ongoing oversight to ensure that the prominence framework continues to support the diverse needs of community broadcasters and the public they serve.

Yours sincerely

Ian Hamm   Jo Curtin

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