



Australian Government



**Future Use of Unassigned Television Channels
Discussion Paper**

**Submission to the Australian Communications and
Media Authority**

April 2006

1. Introduction

The Australian Film Commission (AFC) is an Australian Government agency, operating as part of the Commonwealth Film Program to ensure the creation, availability and preservation of Australian screen content. The AFC enriches Australia's national identity by fostering an internationally competitive audiovisual production industry, making Australia's audiovisual content and culture available to all, and developing and preserving a national collection of sound and moving image.

The AFC has a key role to play in the development of a vibrant audiovisual industry in Australia capable of producing a diverse range of quality products for Australian and international audiences.

The AFC has made submissions to the Department of Communications, IT and the Arts' series of digital television reviews conducted according to Schedule 4 of the *Broadcasting Services Act 1992*.¹ The AFC's focus with respect to digital television is the creation and availability of Australian content. The AFC is concerned that the conversion to digital supports the underlying cultural objectives of content regulation and that Australian programming is not disadvantaged in relation to foreign programming.

The AFC believes that decisions made regarding the broadcasting system must take into account both the cultural importance and popularity of Australian content.

The AFC appreciates the opportunity to provide comments on the possible use of two 7MHz television channels that remain unassigned after planning for digital television.

2. Background

In its submission to DCITA's Discussion Paper on Media Reform Options, the AFC argues strongly that regulation is fundamental to meeting the objectives in the Broadcasting Services Act and should continue to be used to the extent it is still permitted under the Australia US Free Trade Agreement, especially with respect to subscription television.

However, the AFC believes that regulation alone is not and will not be sufficient to sustain appropriate levels of Australian content on future services.

It is the AFC's view that a substantial on-going commitment will also be required to support local production. The extent to which government directly supports the creation of content and supplements this with indirect subsidy measures requires further debate and discussion.

¹ These submissions are available at:
<http://www.afc.gov.au/policyandresearch/policy/broadcasting.aspx>

3. Potential uses of television channels

ACMA has been asked to commence planning in relation to the potential allocation and provide advice on possible uses for and commercial interest in the datacasting spectrum. The AFC believes that in determining the potential uses for new television services, services that include significant levels of Australian content should be prioritised.

The AFC is aware of interest in using this spectrum to relay the new Indigenous television service. In September 2005, the government announced the development of an Indigenous television service at a cost of \$48.5 million over four years. It was announced that:

The new Indigenous television service will build on an initiative already being transmitted on Imparja Television's narrowcast service that uses content provided by Remote Indigenous Media Organisations. New content will be developed for the service and will be available for transmission on other broadcasting platforms, such as community television.

The AFC understands that this service will be a niche narrowcast service that will support the production and broadcasting of more diverse programming, such as Indigenous news, children's and drama programs.

The discussion paper foresees that datacasting transmitter licensees

would potentially be able to provide services such as a range of FTA "narrowcast" channels including religious, ethnic, or home shopping channels, or subscription TV services. This is in addition to the types of services which could be currently provided under a datacasting content licence.

While National Indigenous Television (NITV) – the group charged with the implementation of the new service – will build on the existing narrowcast service of Imparja's Indigenous Community Television satellite transmission and other Indigenous production infrastructure nationwide, it also intends to use a variety of other delivery platforms.

The AFC understands that the NITV committee proposes that NITV be provided with its own 7MHz digital terrestrial channel and act as a channel multiplexer to provide digital carriage of local community broadcast and datacast services as well as a range of other new and innovative services. NITV propose in the alternative that it be provided part of the spectrum to screen its service.

The AFC believes that this would be a suitably innovative use of the unallocated spectrum due to the likely high levels of new, ground-breaking Australian and local community content, that NITV would produce. The AFC also supports the carriage of the NITV service upon any new multiplex service

as a “must carry” be it as an open narrowcasting service, subscription television service, mobile television service or a combination of services.

On principle, the AFC supports any new service that by its very nature will include significant amounts of new Australian content, particularly in those underserved markets, including but not limited to education, children’s, adult drama, documentary and the arts.