About ABC Friends

ABC Friends Ltd is a not-for-profit DGR charity registered with the ACNC. Our purpose is to represent the community interest in defending and promoting the vital role of the ABC as an independent national public media organisation. The organisation has grown in numbers and strength over recent years, with more than 97,000 members and supporters in every state and territory. ABC Friends is not aligned with any political party. This submission is written primarily from the perspective of the ABC.

Introduction

ABC Friends welcomes the federal government's discussion paper on technology scenarios for free to air (FTA) television. This is an appropriate time to consider alternatives to broadcasting as the method of delivery for FTA, given the changes that have occurred over the past decade in viewing habits, particularly for primetime audiences in the mainland capital cities. We note the discussion paper's comment that, because the costs of operating broadcasting transmission networks are significant and fixed, the current technology mix may be unsustainable in the long term as audiences for terrestrial broadcast decline. We also note that, while the discussion paper identifies three technology scenarios, decisions made now will not be fixed in time: there will be a need to adapt as technology and viewing behaviours change.

Guiding principles

Five principles should guide the choice of technology in the medium and longer term:

1. All Australians should be able to access high quality free to air TV regardless of their income or where they live.

   At present, for example, 16% of Australians do not view FTA TV. Many of these people are renters who do not have access to fixed home internet or an external FTA aerial. The 20% of Australians who watch FTA through terrestrial broadcast do not have access to fixed home internet.

   No group should be denied access to FTA, an essential service. Of particular concern is the need to support people on low incomes who cannot meet the costs of equipment or internet services. It follows that audiences should not be expected to bear the costs of any transition to a new technology mix.

2. Changes to the technology mix should not weaken the ABC's independence and role as a national broadcaster as set out in the ABC Act.

3. New technology should be used to enhance free to air provision and guarantee service irrespective of location.

4. The FTA networks should be fully involved in any transition to minimise disruption for services and audiences.

5. Any dividend from the sale of spectrum concerning the ABC and SBS should be distributed to the public broadcasters to support their investment in new online services and the production of content.

Changes to technology and the ABC

The discussion paper outlines some changes that have occurred in media services and their effects on viewing habits. For example:

- Audiences for broadcast viewing on demand (BVOD) services provided by commercial or national broadcasters grew from 18% in 2017 to 44% in 2025.[1]
- Daily primetime audiences for FTA TV services in the five mainland state capital cities declined each year by an average of 3.6% between 2007 and 2024.[2]
- In 2025, 68% of Australian adults used streaming video (SVOD) services compared with 29% in 2017.[3]

The ABC and SBS have played a significant role in the adoption of BVOD content through ABC iview and SBS On Demand. The ABC was an early adopter of digital technologies. Its 2026 annual report states that "ABC iview and ABC listen have never stopped innovating for better public connection and delivery improvement, with a variety of fresh content on a continuing basis. We aim to be the best provider of freely available national services to everyone."

In 2025 ABC iview was the #1 reaching broadcaster in Australia.

The technology scenarios

Of the three scenarios outlined in the discussion paper, scenario one, a partial online scenario with minimal changes to the technologies used to provide commercial FTA services, is the only realistic option in the short to medium term.

Scenario two, the online dominant scenario would, as the discussion paper notes, constitute a significant change to the technology used to deliver free to air television. It would incur significant costs for government, operators, and audiences at a time when all three groups are under financial pressure.

Scenario three, involving upgrades to broadcast capability, would be costly and complex to implement. It also runs counter to market trends: broadcasting is no longer the dominant medium for distributing FTA TV and audiences are increasingly accessing TV through online streaming services. Nevertheless, offering an enhanced broadcast capability might best meet the needs of people in some circumstances or locations.

Technology scenario one

Consumers

Currently 20% of Australians only receive FTA television through terrestrial broadcasting. These people are likely to be older Australians who live outside a capital city and do not have access to fixed home internet. They would suffer considerable hardship if terrestrial broadcasting ceased to be available. Scenario one would have the least cost impact on consumers as most would not need to purchase new equipment or retune existing equipment.

Similarly, the needs of people on low incomes, notably renters with no access to fixed home internet or an external FTA aerial, require careful consideration.

Over the longer term, a further transition from terrestrial broadcasting to online transmission can be expected. Any such change must be carefully planned and accompanied by wide-ranging consultation to ensure that all Australians are able to access essential free media services.

Increased use of digital services and changes in audience viewing habits have created new pressures on commercial FTA services, particularly given the fall in advertising revenue. Commercial FTA networks have reduced their services in regions such as Mildura and the Riverina, and the trend can be

[1] ACMA (2026) *Communications and media in Australia*, ACMA. Refer to the Annual consumer survey interactive report titled *How we watch and listen to content*. Within the interactive report, refer to *Viewing behaviours*.
[2] Departmental analysis of: OzTAM, 5 City Metro, Wks 1-52 2007-2024, Sun-Sat 1800-2400, Total People, Broadcast Audience, Consolidated 7.
[3] ACMA (2026) *Trends and developments in viewing and listening 2024-25*, ACMA, p 5.

expected to continue. People living in in rural and remote locations must be able to access quality entertainment, news, current affairs, cultural pursuits and emergency broadcasting. When commercial TV operators abandon services because they are no longer profitable, the public broadcasters need to step in and guarantee provision. They should be adequately funded to provide this service.

Of particular note is the pressing need for local-based and state-based news, investigative journalism, local sports coverage and cultural events in non-metropolitan locations Much of this local and state-based content has been lost in recent years.

Emergency broadcasting

The ABC operates the nation's only dedicated emergency broadcasting team, providing year-round coverage in close partnership with emergency agencies. In 2025-26, the ABC activated emergency broadcasting for 650 events, a dramatic increase since 2020, when the ABC activated 191 events. Regional communities were most affected, representing nearly four in five emergency events and requiring 212 hours of rolling emergency radio coverage.

The technology mix for free-to-air broadcasting services must take into account the need to meet the growing nationwide need for timely and reliable emergency warning information.

Infrastructure and shared multiplexes

As the discussion paper notes, scenario one would require broadcasters to share multiplexes. Thus, the ABC and SBS would operate on one multiplex rather than two, resulting in a reduction in the number of channels that each offers. This need not restrict the public broadcasters from continuing to offer a wide range of content comparable, or even additional, to that which they currently provide, through a mix of broadcast, streamed, and online services.

The paper notes that multiplex consolidation could achieve modest savings for broadcasters through reduce capital and transmission costs. However, the paper also notes that broadcasters will need to develop or adopt new technologies and this will carry additional costs. Therefore, as noted in principle 5 above, any dividend from the sale of spectrum should be distributed to the public broadcasters to support their investment in new online services and the production of content.

Additional infrastructure needs

Specific conditions will need to be met before any option is fully viable. To guarantee universal access, the NBN should continue to roll out across the country and measures should be explored to support ways in which low income households could be supported if they are unable to access the internet or an aerial, or meet the costs of monthly internet fees.

The requirements of people living in remote communities need further consideration. For example, VAST is envisioned as a supporting mechanism in locations where fixed internet is not available, but not all remote communities can afford the costs of purchasing and maintaining the necessary equipment.

Concluding comments

Ten years ago we could not have imagined the changes that have occurred to the ways Australians consume television, and it is difficult to predict what changes will occur over the coming decade. Careful planning and extensive consultation will be essential to ensure that free-to-air television services serve the needs of, and are accepted by, the Australian public.

In meeting its statutory obligations, the ABC delivers an extraordinary array of distinctive Australian stories to audiences across the country, including children's programs, education, drama, specialist documentaries, science, arts, news, current affairs and more. Australians have embraced online streaming services but the international streamers come nowhere near to offering the level of service

provided by our public broadcasters. Public interest considerations should be integral to any decisions on the future of free to air transmission.