



**SPECIAL BROADCASTING SERVICE (SBS) & NATIONAL INDIGENOUS TELEVISION (NITV)  
SUBMISSION TO - REGIONAL TELECOMMUNICATIONS INDEPENDENT REVIEW**

**AUGUST 2024**

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the review by the Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee (the **Committee**), and the accompanying *2024 Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Issues Paper* (the **Issues Paper**).

SBS has a unique role in the Australian media environment as a national multi-platform public media service. SBS's principal function is to provide multilingual, multicultural and Indigenous radio, television and digital media services that inform, educate and entertain all Australians and, in doing so, reflect Australia's multicultural society.<sup>1</sup>

NITV has proudly been part of the SBS network for over 10 years, fulfilling the aspirations which existed at its outset, rooted in the desire to provide a dedicated platform by, for and about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to tell their stories, preserve their cultures, and ensure their voices are heard.

As the Issues Paper notes, reliable telecommunications infrastructure and access in regional areas must be in place to enable residents to access key services, including services provided by and/or for First Nations communities, as outlined in the Issues Paper.<sup>2</sup>

This submission will focus on digital inclusion and in particular the need to ensure the availability of NITV and SBS to First Nations communities in regional and remote areas via telecommunications infrastructure. SBS/NITV also recently addressed these issues as part of its recent submission to the First Nations Digital Inclusion Roadmap.

**ACCESS TO RELIABLE INTERNET CONNECTIVITY IS INCREASINGLY IMPORTANT AS DIGITAL MEDIA USE AND SERVICES GROW**

The highly regarded *Digital News Report: Australia 2024* (the **Digital News Report**)<sup>3</sup> published in June 2024 revealed that television still remains the most utilised source of news among Australians.<sup>4</sup> While regional and remote Australia generally enjoy reliable access to terrestrial or satellite broadcast signals, the delivery of television via internet should form part of the Committee's consideration, with a recent research by Free TV Australia revealing that 69% [of Australians surveyed in June 2024] accessed television through a digital connection.<sup>5</sup>

While television nevertheless remains popular, people accessing news via online sources (such as news websites and via social media platforms) is on the rise.<sup>6</sup>

General sources of news in recent years	2022	2023	2024
Television	60%	58% (-2 pp)	56% (-2 pp)

<sup>1</sup> SBS Charter, available here <https://www.sbs.com.au/aboutus/how-we-operate/overview-of-sbs-charter/>

<sup>2</sup> Issues Paper, page 4.

<sup>3</sup> By the News and Media Research Centre at the University of Canberra in partnership with the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Oxford University, available at: <https://www.canberra.edu.au/research/faculty-research-centres/nmrc/digital-news-report-australia>

<sup>4</sup> Digital News Report, page 79.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.freetv.com.au/new-polling-shows-millions-will-miss-out-on-free-sport-unless-laws-are-updated/#:~:text=69%25%20access%20TV%20through%20a,considering%20switching%20to%20digital%20soon>

<sup>6</sup> Digital News Report, page 79.

<b>News websites</b>	49%	51% (+2 pp)	53% (+2 pp)
<b>Social media</b>	44%	45% (+1 pp)	49% (+4 pp)
<b>Radio</b>	26%	24% (-2 pp)	27% (+3 pp)
<b>Print</b>	22%	19% (-2 pp)	17% (-2 pp)

Note: pp = percentage point, sources of news are not mutually exclusive to one another.

Relevantly, First Nations communities have higher rates of social media use when compared to non-Indigenous Australians.<sup>7</sup> They are critical platforms on which First Nations communities engage, communicate and obtain news and critical emergency information - particularly in regional and remote communities, and in First Nations languages.

### ACCESS TO NITV ACROSS ALL PLATFORMS IS ESSENTIAL FOR COMMUNITIES

NITV's establishment is the result of decades of advocacy supporting a national platform to tell First Nations stories from First Nations perspectives. It exists to help ensure the preservation of culture, language and story and to help have a positive impact for self-esteem and pride, and to promote understanding and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the wider community.

Inclusion has powerful social, cultural and well-being benefits for First Nations audiences. The impact of seeing one's own culture, community and history represented on-screen is significant. At the same time, there is an equally powerful, but negative impact of exclusion for groups and communities left out of media. This can result in cultural erasure, stereotyping and misrepresentation, social marginalisation, a perceived lack of role models, negative impacts on advocacy, and can influence public perceptions.

In 2012 five years after its launch, NITV joined the SBS network – becoming available to all Australians on free-to-air television. Not only did this improve accessibility to news, information, and content by, for, and about First Nations people across the country, it made NITV available to all Australians. Over time, NITV has been growing its audiences, reach, channels, and platforms – including online, and via social media – sharing authentic, meaningful stories that continue to heal and celebrate, cleanse, grow and inspire Australia's identity and purpose.

In areas where the terrestrial television signal is not available, audiences have the option of installing Viewer Access Satellite Television (VAST), which also carries SBS and NITV services. There have been ongoing concerns regarding the age and operability of VAST equipment in First Nations and remote communities. Cost of the equipment and the lack of access to qualified technicians to repair inoperable equipment mean that many people living remotely may be unable to stay connected through the VAST system. These issues have been identified in the Government-appointed First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group's Initial Report (the **Initial Report**), published in October 2023.<sup>8</sup> Reliable and robust telecommunications infrastructure for these communities would reduce the reliance on VAST, as consumers could access services via the internet.

While NITV broadcasts to 2.1 million television viewers in Australia each month,<sup>9</sup> NITV must also reach its core audience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples via webpages and social media. As at March 2024, 40% of NITV's online traffic came via social media networks, with 70% of NITV online viewers visiting the homepage, articles and webpages via a mobile device.

The Initial Report also noted that there are a range of recognised challenges to ensuring digital inclusion, in ways which are 'specific to the unique and culturally specific ways in which digital technologies are currently being used among First Nations people and communities.'<sup>10</sup> These were explored in depth in the Initial Report, and include:

<sup>7</sup> Carlson, B & Frazer, R 2018. *Social Media Mob: Being Indigenous Online*, Macquarie University, Sydney.

<sup>8</sup> Refer to *First Nations Digital Advisory Group initial report*, as well as *International Journal Equity in Health* and *Mapping the Digital Gap 2023*

<sup>9</sup> Source: OzTam, Regional TAM, Average Monthly Reach 5 mins consecutive. TTL PPL FY24

<sup>10</sup> Initial Report, page 8.

- *Access* – relates to the availability and quality of digital technologies, noting First Nations people record lower accessibility scores than the national average
- *Affordability* – relates to the financial cost of accessing those technologies, noting First Nations people record lower affordability scores than the national average
- *Ability* – relates to digital literacy, and the ability to use technologies safely and to their full potential.<sup>11</sup>

These are complex and multifactorial issues, and any response to challenges in these areas formulated by communities, Government and service providers will be similarly complex. As well as providing its essential content services, there are also opportunities for SBS and NITV to assist in meeting these challenges, taking into account the reach and trust with its audiences – for example, by addressing digital literacy issues in its editorial output or as part of a campaign in partnership with Government.

There are also significant opportunities to deliver improved connectivity or access to critical telecommunications pathways through creative partnerships that will also deliver other community and national benefits. The below case study is an example of a single project delivering several positive public policy outcomes to a First Nations community, including improved emergency telecommunications capability. NITV and SBS would welcome the opportunity to work with Government to expand this initiative across Australia.

**CASE STUDY – NITV/TSIMA Partnership - An impactful, innovative and scalable initiative to elevate community perspectives, improve emergency communications capability, and utilise the reach and resources of NITV and SBS**

An innovative and impactful initiative rolled out by NITV on Waiben (Thursday Island) is demonstrative of the important role NITV can play in delivering innovative solutions to meet the digital inclusion needs of First Nations peoples, using NITV's reach and resources to partner and build capacity at the community level.

NITV has partnered with the Torres Strait Islanders Media Association (**TSIMA**), to place a full-time journalist, [REDACTED], on Waiben with access to a star link and satellite service. This is a relatively straightforward initiative in terms of design and implementation, but has a range of benefits which far outweigh the financial investment required to establish the project.

The presence of a journalist in the Waiben community creates the opportunity and pathway for stories of local significance to gain a national profile through the NITV network. Without such profile, it is far more difficult to elevate these stories and issues into the local and national political landscape. Visibility for First Nations stories frequently results in an increased political profile for the subject of those stories.

This is highlighted by a recent story filed by [REDACTED], addressing the lack of access to digital services on Waiben and the outer islands of the Torres Strait, and the impact of proposed solutions to cultural practices in the region. The story was covered across our digital services, as well as a TV news package that aired on *NITV News* and *SBS World News*.<sup>12</sup>

There are also immediate and practical connectivity benefits arising from [REDACTED] access to a satellite phone, provided as part of her role with NITV, which did not previously exist on Waiben. In the event of an emergency which damages or deactivates Waiben's telecommunications infrastructure, the community has access to a vital means of accessing and sending critical emergency information.

In addition to filing stories on critical issues for the Indigenous communities living in the NPA and Torres Strait, [REDACTED] is filing stories covering the many positive community events and developments which would otherwise not reach a national audience, due to the cost of sending a journalist to a remote location. As noted in this submission, representation in media, particularly for under-represented and distinct cultural groups, has significant impact across a range of social and cultural outcomes.

<sup>11</sup> Initial Report, page 10.

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.sbs.com.au/nitv/article/regional-communities-are-suffering-from-a-lack-of-access-to-reliable-communications/x3v0i829z>

Funding in support of an expanded delivery of these services would provide critical and tangible benefits to remote communities and would strongly support the objectives of the Government's First Nations Digital Inclusion Roadmap. Funding could also be considered to specifically fund NITV's efforts to gather and distribute emergency information in natural disasters. As noted above, a significant number of First Nations communities live in areas which are susceptible to extreme weather events on a regular basis, weather which is expected to worsen in the future.

NITV would welcome the opportunity to discuss the costings and design of this initiative directly with Government.

The TSIMA partnership highlighted in the case study immediately above could be scaled and expanded to remote communities across Australia with additional funding, delivering benefits to the local communities involved, and providing additional First Nations stories for all Australians.

### ***Access to Emergency information***

SBS and NITV also play a unique role in ensuring access to place-based emergency information, presented in a culturally appropriate way, and in-language, and which are complementary to the comprehensive emergency information services delivered by the ABC.

SBS and NITV have been working with National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) to explore a more formalised role in providing communications relating to national emergencies and disasters. NITV's connection to remote First Nations communities is particularly important, as communities in these areas have specific information needs which can vary from those of the population in general.

For example, NITV provided extensive television and online coverage during the floods in northern NSW in 2022, including from Lismore and Cabbage Tree Island, where almost 200 First Nations community members became homeless from the floods. NITV's *The Point* also collaborated with *The Koori Mail* national newspaper in providing additional coverage of the floods. As a further example, the Northern Peninsula Area (NPA) region in Far North Queensland and the islands of the Torres Strait often have poor or no telephone service, and cannot call or access emergency services. Access to emergency information on NITV services provides a link that would not otherwise exist.

NITV is also able to present emergency information in a culturally appropriate way, and in- language, which ensures messaging is as effective as possible. NITV is a trusted, credible and authentic First Nations voice, which is particularly important in times of crisis or emergency.

### **CONCLUSION**

NITV and SBS would welcome the opportunity to continue to contribute to the vital work of the Committee, as well as engage further on the material in this submission or any additional measures under consideration.