

Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia Inc.

"Access to Education"



Submission

to the

Regional Satellite Television Service Review

into the

Viewer Access Satellite Television (VAST) service

from the

Federal Council

of the

**Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia Inc.
ICPA (Aust)**

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Contact:

(Mrs) Suzanne Wilson

Federal Secretary

ICPA (Aust)

FedSecretary@icpa.com.a

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Contact:

(Mrs) Wendy Hick

Federal President

ICPA (Aust)

FedPresident@icpa.com.au

The Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia, ICPA (Aust), welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the *Review of the Viewer Access Satellite Television (VAST) service* identifying issues relating specifically to rural and remote students.

Since 1971, ICPA (Aust) has represented families living in rural and remote regions of Australia, who are passionate about the sustainability and prosperity of the industries they work in. Research indicates that the ability to access affordable and appropriate educational services plays a major factor in determining if a family will remain in rural and remote locations. The goal for our 2700 member families is to achieve equity of educational opportunity for all children living in rural and remote areas, thus ensuring they have access to a continuing and appropriate education determined by their aspirations and abilities rather than the location of their home.

Remote and isolated locations in Australia provide the greatest challenges for improving provision of education options and pathways for children and families. Improving the educational outcomes for rural and remote students requires a national approach that ensures educational delivery of a consistent high standard no matter where the education is provided. The financial cost to families educating children in rural and remote locations continues to rise and can be attributed to many leaving these areas. An increasing number of rural and remote families are separating with the mother and children relocating to larger cities and towns during the years of schooling. A drastic measure such as this by families to reduce educational expenses, negatively impacts the family unit, small communities and rural schools.

Rural education is interlinked with other aspects of rural communities, such as fluctuating populations, economic influences, seasonal conditions and climate. It must be recognised that attempts to address inequities in the provision of quality education would not be effective unless broader economic and social issues are also considered. In order to efficiently and effectively meet the needs of these students, inequity issues must be understood. Some of these children are not considered vulnerable because they are not impacted by extreme levels of poverty. Rather, due to geographic isolation from services, many rural and remote families are expected to cover out of pocket costs for the education of their children from early childhood through to tertiary education, which is not experienced by urban families.

While all Australian governments recognise the social and economic benefits of a high quality and equitable school education system, ICPA (Aust) continues to devote an enormous amount of volunteer hours holding relevant governments to account to address inequities. Much of this can be attributed to many programs not reaching locations where the programs are costly to administer and jurisdictions not providing additional funding to ensure program objectives are met. Poor communication services also impact greatly on what is available to students and while internet services continue to improve, access for rural students lags well behind that available in metropolitan areas.

Access to Free To Air (FTA) television services is important to ICPA members as they use television services to remain informed, access educational material as well as viewing for entertainment. Viewer Access Satellite Television (VAST) service provides television services to a large number of ICPA members due to the rural and remote locations in which they live.

Feedback on VAST

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

The VAST service delivers television via satellite to households in rural and remote Australia that would not otherwise have access to free to air television programming. ICPA (Aust) believes the VAST service is vital to these families for the distribution of information, news, educational programs as well as providing entertainment. ICPA members not only use VAST for television services but also radio broadcasts. For a large number of people living in rural and remote areas, it is extremely difficult to pick up a radio station signal at their homes and VAST service provides an opportunity to access radio broadcasts. Families who live on rural properties utilising self generated power have the added challenge of interference from their generators and power systems which will not allow radio signals through, however the VAST satellite service can still provide radio broadcasts in these situations. While outages due to weather can be problematic at times with VAST services due to the satellite beam being disrupted, the outages are only temporary and having a VAST system allows for television and radio services where they would not be possible otherwise. Other options for television services used in larger centres such as online television streaming are not possible for those in rural and remote locations due to the slow, unreliable, limited data available and costly internet plans for service in those areas. The VAST service is also extremely beneficial to those who are regularly on the move, whether as travelers or through their work, such as mustering and fencing camps.

2. *Are the current range of TV and radio services offered appropriate?*

ICPA (Aust) believes the educational programs offered by current FTA services via VAST are of high quality and remain an important educational tool for both students at small rural schools and Schools of Distance Education (SODE) as well as younger children who have difficulty accessing early years programs in their geographically isolated areas. The educational programs that rural and remote children can access via VAST services are sometimes one of the only opportunities for them to learn about and have exposure to the “wider world” due to their geographic isolation. The importance of exposure to current affairs, news and educational programs for these children is significant. Along with ABC Kids which offers programming for the preschool age group including Play School and Sesame Street, ABC ME broadcasts education programs on channel 23 on Freeview during 10:00am and 12:00pm during school terms (ABC TV Education, 2018).

Programs for Primary School age aired include, but are not limited to:

- Behind the News (BTN)
- Ecomaths
- Backyard Science
- Bushwacked
- Mother Tongue
- Fierce Earth
- Full Proof
- Harriet’s Army
- History Hunters
- Horrible Histories
- House of Sound
- I Can’t Go To School Today
- Operation Ouch
- Science Max! Experiments at Large

Programs for Secondary School age aired include, but are not limited to:

- 199 Little Heros
- Against All Odds: Inside Statistics
- Atom Bond
- Author Talk
- Bertram Poppingstock Problem Solver
- Bistro Escargot
- Bringing Books to Life
- Ethics Matters
- Making Media
- Shakespear Uncovered

Other Free To Air stations provide some of the following educational programs:

- Australia, with Simon Reeve, SBS
- Mighty Ships, 7Two
- Genius, SBS
- Make it Right, NITV
- Dreamings: Art of Aboriginal Australia
- Shakespeare's Tomb, SBS
- Unwrapped, SBS food
- Attenborough's the Life of Mammals, One
- Insight, SBS
- Interview, 7
- Strangest Weather on Earth, 7Two
- 365: Every Day Documentaries, SBS Viceland
- The Eighties: The Tech Boom, SBS
- Rise of the Machines, SBS Viceland
- Can We Control Gravity? SBS
- Go Back to Where You Come From, SBS
- Colour Theory, NITV
- Kochie's Business Builders, 7
- Yamba's Playtime Program, Imparja

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

Without access to the VAST service most rural and remote families would have no access to free to air television. While advances in internet technology, such as the nbn Sky Muster Satellite, have provided the ability for some to access over the top (OTT) providers such as Netflix, reliability (signal strength, data speeds, service dropouts) and cost of internet plans (along with OTT providers plans) are currently prohibitive factors. ICPA (Aust) believes that the heavy reliance on VAST for television services in rural and remote Australia will continue beyond 2020.

The relatively high cost of VAST set-top boxes (approx. \$260) and their corresponding replacement remote controls (\$30-40) which have a short life-span, are just another set of expenses incurred by rural and remote families to access a basic need, especially considering households that can access FTA from local transmission towers do not have a comparative recurring expense. From some ICPA members' experience, VAST set-top boxes last on average 3 years before needing to be replaced. Environmental conditions in warmer areas such as NW Qld and the Northern Territory seem to affect the longevity of the set top boxes.

Despite cost, the ease of changing VAST boxes when they are not working is appreciated. After an initial installation, families can order a new VAST set-top box over the phone (pay for it), have it posted out and replace a faulty box themselves. This is an improvement over the old system boxes which were more difficult and often required a technician to travel out to set up which meant families could wait for weeks or months to have their television/radio service restored.

Recently available television units which have the VAST box already included in the television may simplify some installation processes however, it is still yet to be seen if these VAST televisions will hold up to conditions or if they will require replacement as regularly as VAST set-top boxes, which may be a significant cost to users.

VAST set-top boxes which have the ability to record would also be welcomed.

The Broadcast and Content Reform Package (BCRP) which includes greater local content obligations for regional commercial television broadcasters (including incentives for locally filmed news) and new transmitter licence tax arrangements should provide more certainty for the broadcasting community and hopefully encourage more services to be available through VAST systems and perhaps also indirectly lower equipment and installation costs for VAST customers.

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

ICPA (Aust) believes that households and travellers should be able to access both State and Regional based News programs relative to their area, or the area where they are travelling, with both television and radio. It is extremely important for news to be relevant to those watching and in particular weather broadcasts and having local events reported on. Times of impending danger and natural disaster also require local information to be broadcast. While state based News may seem to cover the important issues for the entire state, regional, rural and remote areas often get very little coverage and a more region specific approach being available in addition to state based News would be beneficial.

People living out in rural and remote areas also often comment on the benefit of being able to access the various ABC channels from different states as if they arrive home later in the evening and have missed their state news, they are still able to access later states such as WA ABC. Having a cross section of state news broadcasts and a choice of times for viewing available in both television and radio is welcomed and also necessary for those families living near state borders as their closest town may actually be in another state.

5. *Specifically, how could the current VAST service be improved?*

Reducing hardware costs of the VAST service to rural and remote households would bring them in line with households that have access to FTA transmitter signals and no similar cost.

Improving the strength of the VAST signal, or hardware reception capabilities to prevent outages during weather events would provide more dependability.

Local news programming to be relative to the rural and regional areas where it is being broadcast through both television and radio. Another improvement would be offering more ABC Radio frequencies as the content in the current suite is not necessarily relevant to the region receiving it (eg for weather, Road reports, etc.). Local road reports, particularly via radio are important especially at

times of weather events (most notably during the “Wet Season”) to enable families to monitor road conditions for rural school bus runs and travel to get their children to and from small rural schools. The use of the VAST service is widespread but the information broadcast should be relevant and cater for the numerous areas which rely on VAST for television/radio access.

Changes in the media landscape—2010 to now

6. *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?*

While advances in internet technology, such as the nbn Sky Muster Satellite, have improved internet service for families living in regional, rural and remote areas, the ability for these limited capacity services does not realistically provide the ability access over the top (OTT) providers such as Netflix for customers on these services. Reliability (signal strength, data speeds, service dropouts) and cost of internet plans (coupled with OTT providers plans) along with data restrictions for those on Sky Muster services are currently large prohibitive factors to accessing streamed viewing content. For those able to access somewhat inexpensive unlimited data plans, watching online television and streamed audio is more of an option, however a significant number of families living in the bush do not have this opportunity. ICPA (Aust) believes that the heavy reliance on VAST for television services in rural and remote Australia will continue beyond 2020.

Changes in technology and distribution networks

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

The possibility of a hybrid model being used in the future to deliver television and radio services and incorporating a satellite and internet receiver (as used in other countries) would have to be seriously considered due to the current lack of data, expense of plans and reliability issues for those living in VAST service areas. If developing technologies can overcome these obstacles, other delivery models may have opportunity in areas where it is difficult to receive television/radio services, however at present and for the near future, data restrictions, cost and reliability are limiting factors that prevent these types of technologies from being utilised widely in rural and remote areas.

Conditional Access

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

Having a website to order VAST services as well as a phone number that can be rung is appreciated by people living in rural and remote areas as limited data can sometimes affect their ability to access websites. The website to order VAST services is quite informative, however it can still be difficult to get right through the application process even with the details and instructions offered. The page where the residence location is selected (map) is a bit confusing once your location is deemed to not have a transmitter as to what the next step is to proceed with the application. It can take re-reading the directions (which are on another page) several times to find the correct way forward. Once in the actual application section, the process is pretty straight forward. The expected time frame for approval of a VAST service was not easily found on the website without going through the entire application process. A

trial run through the order process with residents from rural and remote areas might offer some suggestions as to how wording and structure on the website might be improved to follow an easier pathway for ordering or finding answers to questions not listed in the FAQs.

9. *What are the key reasons for maintaining the conditional access arrangements beyond 2020?*

ICPA (Aust) supports the current conditional access arrangements where in order to receive VAST commercial services a household must be located in:

- A remote TV licence area
- A regional or metropolitan licence, but reliable reception of terrestrial TV reception is not possible, or
- An area that the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) has declared to be service deficient.

Funding

10. *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?*

No Comment

Conclusion

Accessing information including news pertaining to the local area, educational programs as well as entertainment via VAST is vital for rural and remote students who have no other means of watching FTA TV or listening to radio broadcasts. The availability of FTA television allows these children and their families to remain informed, be involved in current affairs and experience educational programs that they may not be able to access otherwise. Developing further improvements in the delivery of this media beyond 2020 can only benefit geographically isolated families.

Bibliography

ABC TV Education, About, viewed 20 June 2018, www.abc.net.au/tveducation/