

ACCAN Review
Department of Communications and the Arts
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Review of the effectiveness of section 593 of the Telecommunications Act 1997

Who we are. We're a group of Academics with significant expertise in telecommunications, social impact of public policy and long standing support for consumer representation.

Background. The Department of Communications and the Arts is conducting a review of the effectiveness of section 593 of the Telecommunications Act 1997 (Telco Act), with reference to the most recent grants of financial assistance provided to the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN).

Under section 593, which was enacted in 1997, the Minister may make grants of financial assistance to:

- a consumer body for purposes in connection with the representation of the interests of consumers in relation to telecommunications issues; and
- a person or body for purposes in connection with research into the social, economic, environmental or technological implications of developments relating to telecommunications.

The funding of these grants is fully recovered by the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) as a component of the annual carrier licence charges on eligible telecommunications carriers.

Current arrangements and outcomes. In 2012, the Commonwealth entered into the second multi-year funding agreement with ACCAN. Indexed funds of around \$2 million (GST exclusive) per annum are provided under that agreement, including approximately \$250,000 per annum for a grants program administered by ACCAN, which incorporates research. The agreement has a five-year term and expires at the end of May 2017.

Between 2012 and 2015, ACCAN represented telecommunications consumers on 36 government, industry and member committees, including the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) Consumer Consultative Committee, the ACMA [Australian Communications and Media Authority] Consumer Consultative Forum, the DoCA [Department of Communications and the Arts] Stay Safe Online Week Steering Group, the NBN Co Public Information on Migration (PIM) Consumer Working Group, the Telstra CEO and Consumer Roundtable and Communications Alliance Working Groups.

During the same period, ACCAN also made submissions on behalf of consumers to over 100 inquiries and consultations, engaged with Government and industry on over 30 issues and developed 11 standalone consumer policy positions.

Support for ACCAN. By any measure ACCAN has successfully carried out its function, is actively representing consumers and has successfully administered an important competitive grants program and research into the social, economic, environmental and technological implications of developments relating to telecommunications. ACCAN has built a large individual and organizational membership, fostered community awareness of telecommunications related consumer rights and successfully held an annual forum focusing on consumer representation.

Future arrangements under section 593. ACCAN should continue with its role as the independent consumer representative organization with a new funding arrangement under section 593 for the period 2017 to 2022. The increase in telecommunications related activity within Australia over the past decade, which is expected to continue to expand over the next decade, highlights the need for significantly additional funding to be made available to ACCAN under section 593 for the period 2017 to 2022. Robust consumer representation is a key ingredient to improving national telecommunications related outcomes. Funding should continue for the competitive grants program and research administered by ACCAN as it is a specialty source of research funding provided through a highly effective scheme producing robust applied research outcomes that span a diverse range of consumer related topics.

Disclosure. Some of the signatories have received research grant funding under the ACCAN grants scheme. We are of the strong belief that the grants scheme is extremely important to support important independent consumer-oriented research that would not otherwise be possible. The grants scheme enables innovative research that is not generally able to be supported through other sources of public research funding.

Signed.

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