

# General comments

Media Access Australia (MAA) regards the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network(ACCAN) as an effective, well-run and worthwhile organisation that provides critical consumer representation and research focussed on a wide variety of telecommunication issues that really matter to consumers.

The independent grants program and research which ACCAN administers, makes funding possible for important projects with flow-on benefits for many sections of the community.

If grant funding though ACCAN was to cease, Media Access Australia believes that this would have a noticeable negative impact upon a large group of marginalised Australians, being those with a disability or impairment. Just under 20% of people self-report they have a disability, yet many observers maintain that the real percentage is higher than that.

The independent grants program and research which ACCAN administers has been responsible for making dozens of worthy telecommunications projects possible, including two from MAA that would have otherwise not been able to provide vital information and useful resources for those people living with a disability.

The first of the two initiatives funded by the grants scheme was the Social Media Accessibility submission in 2011 which was centred around conducting research and then creating resources to support consumers with disabilities. This project provides information for Australians that is largely unavailable elsewhere, and has since been reviewed and updated in 2016 at our own expense in order for this online resource to remain up-to-date.

The second submission that was successful in receiving grant-funding from ACCAN was the Affordable Access project in 2015. This initiative is all about providing equal access to technology for people with hearing, sight or cognitive issues or disabilities, that is both affordable and easy to use. The project’s purpose was to create a content-rich website with freely-downloadable tip sheets, so consumers with disabilities and impairments, of all ages and stages of life, can find details on low-cost and free software and devices that support their everyday needs.

Affordable Access was launched on 14 September 2016 and provides impartial information on devices, communications technology, and telecom plans that is simply not freely available to Australian consumers anywhere else in a fully-accessible online format.

# Response

## 1. Has ACCAN effectively performed the role of representing the interests of consumers in relation to telecommunications?

Media Access Australia is of the firm belief that the current funding model administered by ACCAN is benefitting many sections of our society and should be continued. The organisation has effectively represented a wide and diverse range of consumer interests within the broader telecommunications sector.

## 2. Does ACCAN effectively engage with a broad range of stakeholders, including industry, government agencies and other consumer groups?

As demonstrated at ACCAN’s annual conference in mid-September 2016, the organisation works well with other consumer groups, industry and government departments and utilities and has been involved in and helped promote a large number of worthwhile initiatives with these stakeholders in the last year alone.

## 3. Considering the consumer representation role performed by ACCAN, has ACCAN adopted an appropriate balance between representation of general consumers and representation of those with particular needs?

Media Access Australia believe that they have. A rich diversity of Australians make up our society and all sections of the community need to be supported with their various specific telecommunication needs. The list includes those with a disability or impairment, a chronic health condition, varying racial backgrounds, indigenous people, older Australians, working families, youth, parents and carers, and recent arrivals to Australia.

## 4. Is a telecommunications specific consumer representative body funded by Government required, or:

### a) Should Government fund representation only for a body or bodies representing consumers with particular needs?

4. Yes it is. 4a). No, as this may exclude some sections of society, as all people are consumers, no matter what their financial status, age, or sensory or physical ability.

### b) Could a telecommunications representation function be carried out by a general consumer body?

No, not with the same efficacy and deep level of telecommunications knowledge that ACCAN possesses.

### c) Could Government more directly measure consumer views by undertaking its own consumer research?

This route risks the potential of diluting the measurement of consumer viewpoints. Having one independent organisation in ACCAN that provides a unified voice allows for better decision-making and economies of scale and allows all voices to be heard.

## 5. Have you seen any examples of how research funded through the Independent Grants Program (IGP) has influenced Government policy or the behaviour of industry? Could changes be made to the IGP to make the funded research projects more influential?

Every year, ACCAN administers a competitive Independent Grants Program in accordance with their funding agreement. From Media Access Australia’s perspective, one of our projects funded through the IGP had a marked impact on policy.

SociABILITY: We know through direct contact that the social media guide we researched and then compiled from grant-funding by ACCAN provided advice to the Australian government that was accepted and considered. This project was also used by governments overseas (the U.S.A and Hungary) in regards to assisting with their development of social media policy.

The SociABILITY materials are referred to on the US government guidelines for social media in its DigitalGov program. See: <https://www.digitalgov.gov/resources/improving-the-accessibility-of-social-media-in-government/>

Affordable Access: As this initiative was only launched mid-September 2016, it is too recent to gauge the wider impact of the website and resources on industry behaviour or Government policy.

## 6. Do you believe research funded through the IGP is useful to consumers? Could changes be made to the IGP to make the funded research projects more useful to consumers?

SociABILITY: This project is perceived to have had significant positive impact on consumers here in Australia and overseas and we know this through the number of downloads from our Media Access Australia website (over 2,000 groups and individuals downloaded the report), and the many requests for printed materials that we recieved (we ran out of stock).

Affordable Access: This project has been well-received but it is still too recent to gauge as it was only launched in mid-September 2016. Yet initial anecdotal feedback is that the resources and website are very useful and practical for vulnerable consumers.

## 7. Is it appropriate for the Government to continue to provide grants to a consumer representative group (or any other non-government body) to undertake research into telecommunications issues?

Yes. Through Media Access Australia's work and presence at conferences and events related to disability, technology and digital communications, we hear directly from consumers and end-users of our services just how useful and practical our work through the SociABILITY and Affordable Access projects are. Although, Media Access Australia contributes in-kind resources and promotes these through our communication channels, in truth these projects would not have been able to go ahead without the financial support received from ACCAN.

## 8. If this is appropriate, what changes (if any) would you recommend to how the funding is provided and who it is provided to?

No changes. Having a ‘one-stop shop’ is the best and most equitable funding model.

## 9. Should any other activities, other than consumer representation and research, be considered for funding under section 593 of the Telco Act? If so, what should these be and what would be the rationale for funding such activities be?

In order to effectively carry out the charter of consumer representation and research funded under Section-593 of the Telco Act, Media Access Australia believes that this should continue to be the sole focus, rather than diluting the pool of available funding which could impact on the ability of worthwhile programs within this space to be adequately supported.

If additional funding were to be provided for ACCAN to undertake additional work, we think that extra resources being made available to extend and enhance consumer education within the broader telecommunications sector would be money very well spent.