# Submission: Consumer representation: Review of section 593 of the *Telecommunications Act 1997* Issues paper

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Yes

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## General comments

We make our submission having been the recipients of two ACCAN research grants –

1. 2012: “High Speed Broadband and Household Media Ecologies”, $45,000
2. 2012-2013: “Death and the Internet: Consumer Issues for Planning and Managing Death Online”, $50,000

## Response

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

Yes. Our ACCAN funded research was directly concerned with representing the interests of consumers.

In our research on High Speed Broadband and Household Media Ecologies, we conducted extensive door-to-door surveying in early NBN rollout sites in Melbourne and in Hobart, capturing and representing consumer attitudes to the NBN.

This research on consumer attitudes to the NBN provided data that helped inform numerous academic publications (2 published reports, 2 non-peer-reviewed publications, 1 conference presentation, 9 peer-reviewed journal articles, 1 research book chapter), and was reported in mass media and industry press syndicated nationally by Fairfax, News Limited and The Leader Group, (for example The Age (x2); Sydney Morning Herald (x2); The Voice; Canberra Times; Brisbane Times; Daily Advertiser; Computer World; ARN; Telecommpaper; Commsday; ITWire; The Conversation; and no doubt others that we missed).

Our research on Consumer Issues for Planning and Managing Death Online, has contributed to or informed over 20 peer-reviewed academic publications. This collection of work has been cited more than 100 times (Google Scholar count). In addition, the work has been presented at numerous international conferences, including the conferences of: The Association of Internet Researchers Annual Conference (AoIR); The International Communications Association (ICA): The American Anthropological Association (AAA); the Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and Commonwealth (ASA); Foundation of Digital Games.

Public engagement from this research includes:

* publications in a number of Conversation articles and interviews for a number of nationally syndicated news publications, as well as several interviews on public radio (e.g. ABC radio Life Matters program);
* presentations at public events (Ian Potter Museum has an exhibition opening ‘The Dead Don’t Bury Themselves’; panellist at Film screening of ‘A Will for the Woods’);
* hosting a roundtable discussion at the *International Cemetery, Cremation and Funeral Association (ICCFA)* expo, New Orleans, April 2016, for key industry stakeholders to share experiences of technology change in the funeral industry;
* presentations on expert panels the Australian Internet Governance Forum (Melbourne, 2014), and the International Internet Governance Forum (Brazil, 2016), which is archived on the IGF YouTube channel.

These diverse public and industry engagements mean that our research findings have informed a diverse range and number of audiences, including technology developers, the funeral industry, as well consumers.

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

ACCAN’s engagement with the University research community is excellent. ACCAN’s processes for awarding and administering research grants, and for assessing the outcomes of its funded research projects, are widely regarded in the research community as being transparent, fair and effective.

ACCAN’s research grants are modest in dollar terms, but are very effective in seeding more ambitious research projects. For example, in the case of consumer attitudes to High Speed Broadband, 45$k in ACCAN funding has seeded $278k in funding from other agencies. In the case of Consumer Issues for Planning and Managing Death Online, $50k in ACCAN funding has seeded $256k in funding from other agencies.

### 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?

This is not in our area of expertise.

### 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?

Telecommunications are critical for all people, not only for those with special needs. Telecommunications are critical for participation in the contemporary work force, for accessing government services, for participating in e-commerce, for participating in education, the cultural life of the nation, and so many other aspects of contemporary society.

Government funded consumer representatives in telecommunications is essential to ensure independent advocacy of consumer interests.

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

No. Telecommunications are foundational infrastructure in an information society. Telecommunications are necessary to access other goods and services, and this enabling role sets telecommunications apart from other consumer items.

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

No. Government policy shapes many aspects of telecommunications consumption. Consumer views on telecommunication therefore involves consumer views on government policies, and these data are best captured by an agency at arm’s length from government.

## 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?

Our ACCAN funded research was instrumental in the team establishing an excellent working relationship with key personnel in the NBN Co, in particular Katrina Harrison, NBN Co’s Customer Focused Design Manager; Tim Stone, Product Business Development Manager; Raphael Fiorini, Senior Analyst, Market Intelligence; and Anne Flanagan, Marketing Manager. Numerous consultations between our team and NBN Co brought the ACCAN research findings directly to the attention of these NBN Co decision makers. NBN Co were sufficiently impressed with the research to sign-on as Partner Investigator in an ARC Linkage Grant application LP130100228 researching “The impact of high-speed broadband on Australian home-business” (ARC $316,985; NBN Co $144,264 cash and $338,332 in-kind). Unfortunately, the application was not successful.

The ACCAN report was also sent directly to the then Minister for Communications with an offer of a private briefing. The offer was not taken up.

One key finding in our research drew attention to the difficulties tenants experienced in accessing NBN as a consequence of the necessity to have the prior permission of the landlord. The report may have contributed to discussions that resulted in amendment to this policy.

The research supported by the Death and the Internet: Consumer Issues for Planning and Managing Death Online was brought to the attention of an influential international audience at the 2015 Internet Governance Forum in João Pessoa, Brazil. The presentation took the form of a “hypothetical”, filled the room to capacity and was extremely well received. The hypothetical was repeated in Australia at the ACCAN general meeting in 2016 with equal success. A report was also produced outlining the policy vacuum and challenges associated with the deposition of digital assets and other materials after death. This report was widely circulated to relevant parties including funeral director associations and estate planning organizations. A summary of results was published in the Will Wills and Estates Planning journal.

## 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?

Our research is empirical, gathers data directly from consumers, and through our reports and academic and popular publications, brings an analysis of consumer interests to the attention of scholars, the wider public, and decision makers.

We are satisfied with the processes ACCAN uses to award and administer grants for telecommunications research projects. The awarding of grants engages expert researchers in a competitive process we regard as fair and transparent. The ACCAN grant application and reporting process has low overheads for researchers, which enables us to expend our time and our grant money on research rather than administration.

## 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.

As reported above, specific research related to telecommunications is desirable because telecommunication are foundational infrastructure in an information society, and a non-government body is best placed to administer this research as Government policy shapes many aspects of telecommunications consumption.

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

We would not recommend change, and support the continuation of ACCAN funding, particularly for its grants scheme in supporting key areas of consumer telecommunications research and education.

## 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?

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