CONROY MUST OUTLINE HIS DIGITAL 'BAIL OUT' PLAN FOR COMMUNITY TELEVISION

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Communications Minister Stephen Conroy must detail his digital "bail out" plan for Perth community television station Access 31 and clarify if he will also "bail out" other community television stations across the country.

In what appeared to be a naive, political chest-beating exercise, Senator Conroy recklessly set a 2013 digital television switchover deadline back in December, before doing anything to ensure community television's digital future was assured.

This was one of the reasons why the previous government did not set a firm switchover date and instead was working to implement a Digital Action Plan to ensure critical issues were addressed, including the shoring-up of community television's digital future.

Access 31 and other community television stations across the country have expressed grave concerns about their futures as a result of the Rudd Labor Government's failure to provide certainty and support, despite setting a switchover deadline.

A key issue is to ensure community television is allocated spectrum to allow for digital transmission and to assist it with costly transition upgrades. The previous government was planning to auction digital tv spectrum (Channel A) for narrowcasting, with requirements for community television stations to be accommodated in any offering.

Senator Conroy has now "taken a step back" from this plan, creating further uncertainty and financial pressure for community television. Despite this the recent Federal Budget failed to provide any meaningful interim support for community television.

However, on 11 June, Channel 10 Perth reported that Senator Conroy's office said the Federal Government would "bail out" Perth's Access 31 and assist it to broadcast after analogue is phased out.

Senator Conroy must explain just what this "bail out" entails and whether he will "bail out" all community television across the country that are also being adversely affected by his mixed messages and digital bumbling.

Instead of blaming the previous government and trying to handball his problems to state governments, the minister should act like one and deal with an issue made all the more urgent by a deadline he set.