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Community Television

SPEECH

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Speaker Bandt, Adam, MP

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Mr BANDT (Melbourne) (17:06): I rise today because the future of community TV in Australia is under threat. Community TV stations are a powerful and important part of our society and democracy. They add diversity to our media and give a voice to people and issues not often afforded airtime on mainstream networks. Like community radio, community TV is an incubator for some of our upcoming stars in the broadcast industry, both in front of and behind the camera. But it seems that Minister Turnbull and the government do not understand this.

In September last year, the Minister for Communications announced that he plans to cut access to broadcast spectrum for community TV stations at the end of this year, 2015. The plan of the minister and the Abbott government to push community stations off digital channels risks sending community television to the grave. Instead of keeping this valuable space open as a community asset, the government is putting the interests of media chiefs before that of community television viewers. While the big channels are eyeing off a \$200 million purchase of the spectrum, community TV is a not-for-profit community voice, there to enable all members of the community to produce content for broadcast on free-to-air television. Community TV broadcasts content that is unlikely to be seen on the major national broadcasters. It is also the place where people in the entertainment industry learn their skills. Australians know prominent figures such as Rove McManus, Corinne Grant, Stella Young and Costa Georgiadis. They are high-profile figures who have made a big contribution to Australian TV and entertainment. They all got their start on community TV. There are community TV stations across the country that provide an invaluable community service. Channel 31 in Melbourne and Geelong, 31 Digital Brisbane, TVS Sydney, West TV Perth and Channel 44 in Adelaide are all facing blackout as a result of this decision by Minister Turnbull.

While community TV is important around the country, I want to inform the chamber today about programs running on Channel 31, based in my electorate of Melbourne and broadcast to the whole Melbourne metropolitan area and Geelong. I have been on Channel 31 a number of times. It was my great pleasure to be a guest last year on *Chair Chat*, produced by Disability Media Australia. Disability Media Australia produces a range of shows by and for the disability community. *Chair Chat* is a show produced by volunteers who have a disability and are learning the technical skills of TV and broadcasting, gaining the skills that might lead to employment in the sector.

No Limits is a disability lifestyle program that speaks to the issues important to people in the community. Right now, there are serious issues affecting people with a disability in Australia. Government cuts to the disability support pension and implementation of the NDIS have been highlighted as key issues that do not get the representation, coverage or perspective in major broadcast media that a platform such as *No Limits* can provide. It is all the more important given this government's brutal budget funding cut to ABC's Ramp Up, a vital space for self-representation in the disability community.

Community TV also provides a platform for shows that are created by and for a range of community groups around Australia in a range of community languages. This includes in my electorate of Melbourne. Melbourne is home to people from all walks of life and speakers of hundreds of languages. Many people in Melbourne depend on community TV for information and connection with community in their own language.

One of the most watched shows on Channel 31 in greater Melbourne is *Vietnamese TV*, produced by the Vietnamese Television Association Inc. under the leadership of its president, Dr Tien Kieu. The Vietnamese community is this year celebrating its 40th anniversary in Australia. Its members have achieved so much in that time and made such an outstanding contribution to this country. *Vietnamese TV* on Channel 31 has been running continuously since 1996. Around 20,000 TV sets reportedly regularly tune into that show, representing perhaps some 40,000 viewers. Now, that is out of 80,000 members of the Vietnamese community in Victoria. It is the only locally produced free-to-air TV show that is by and for the local Vietnamese community. It carries content and stories about local issues affecting the community and news that is unique to Vietnamese speakers in Australia. While some Vietnamese speakers are able to access satellite broadcasts produced overseas, primarily

by Vietnamese communities located in the United States or by the Vietnamese government, these broadcasts do not cover the local issues or reflect unique local viewpoints.

As part of Minister Turnbull's announcement, he made the suggestion that the best outcome for community TV would be to provide the entirety of their content and services online. But community representatives are clear that most viewers of shows like *Vietnamese TV* will not be able to continue watching these shows if they go online, and that stands to reason when you consider the age and language barriers that some of these viewers will face. If it is the case, as the minister says, that the future of the nation's TV broadcasters is online, why isn't the minister pushing the commercial stations off air and online? Why is it only community TV, the one least able to afford it? It is clear that pushing community television to internet broadcasting at the end of this year will kill off this important part of our media mix.

The government has no plan for a viable future for community television. Community TV stations have received barely a year's notice of the government's plan and absolutely minimal financial support. Minister Turnbull has allocated just \$450,000 over two years to support community TV stations to make the transition to internet-only broadcasting—\$450,000 for five community stations over two years. Worse, this money would not be extra money; the funding would be taken from existing production grants currently used to support the production of new content. How are community TV channels and program producers expected to fundamentally transform their operating model under these circumstances? There will be no transition. Community TV will die.

What is more, as my colleague Senator Scott Ludlam has pointed out, the rolling NBN debacle makes any transition by 2015 simply out of the question. Network speeds simply are not there. Even for those fortunate enough to live in a zone with the NBN, it is clear that online-only broadcasting will not reach anywhere near the same audience as community TV. The current number of page views for uploads of community TV programs bear this out, being considerably lower than the number of broadcast viewers. According to figures provided by Nielsen, 89 per cent of all video hours viewed are still delivered by broadcast television. Free-to-air TV viewing averages 24 hours per week, whereas video viewed via the internet averages a little over two hours per week.

Many vulnerable Australians or older people or people who for whatever reason do not regularly use the internet or older members of the Vietnamese community who may not be able to afford computers or excessive data packages will just miss out. And there is a joy in casually flicking between channels and finding yourself seeing a suburban orchard on *Vasili's Garden to Kitchen* or getting sucked into a show about a hobby or interest that you would never think to seek out via an internet search. It is simply not realistic to expect that Australians will have access to community TV if it is taken off the free-to-air spectrum this year. Meanwhile, it is likely that many programs and broadcasters will be unable to continue producing shows if community TV is pushed off the spectrum.

Minister Turnbull argues that community television on the internet will be free from the current restrictions on advertising and so will be able to carry any advertising it chooses. However, this is highly disingenuous, as current sponsors are unlikely to move online. Community television is not for profit and currently self-funding, but losing broadcasting rights will break the business model. With the very limited resources available to the sector, it is grossly unrealistic to expect that community TV stations could find a new model of internet-only advertising.

There is no pressing technical need for the spectrum currently used by community TV stations to be vacated in the time frames given. The sector is clear that there are options that would enable community TV to continue broadcasting while also ensuring that valuable spectrum can be managed efficiently for all Australians. Many suspect that this is being driven by the department, out of a long held desire to wipe out community TV, but the minister has signed up to it. At the same time that this government is breaking its election promise by cutting funding to the ABC and SBS, meaning less local content, less diversity and fewer Australian stories on our TVs, Minister Turnbull is planning to wipe out the future of community TV.

I say to Minister Turnbull: this will mean political pain for no appreciable gain. This is a test as to whether life under your leadership, Minister Turnbull, would be more enlightened or just more of the same. Here is a change to kill community TV or save it. To the public I say that, if you watch community TV or you know people who do or, if you recognise how important community TV is for communities across Melbourne and Australia, now is the time to take action. A public campaign involving many well-known faces was put on pause while the sector lobbied the government. Well, it is time to rev it up again. Like so much of the Abbott government's brutal

agenda, these cuts can be stopped—and we know that because we have done it before. Last year, the future of community radio was under threat, but the community came together and raised its voice and fended off the cuts. In the context of a brutal budget, the minister did the right thing by community radio broadcasters. Now it is time for him to do the right thing by community TV.