

Despite the bleating, bush is bombarded with services

THE Nationals, long the tail that wags the Coalition dog in Canberra, continue to bleat about the paucity and fragility of media services in the bush. After the short, sharp Senate committee hearings about media reform last week, senators Barnaby Joyce and Fiona Nash continue to mutter about crossing the floor to defeat the Coonan media reform package.

But their arguments are based on a lie: that is, that rural people are denied the kind of media services available to their city cousins. It is simply not true.

I am a bush boy, and therefore able to compare the way it is with the way it was. I grew up on a farm in western Victoria, 300km from my nearest capital city, where the only radio signal I could pick up with my home-made crystal set was the local commercial AM service. Our five-valve mantle radio, powered by a six-volt car battery because we had no mains electricity, could pick up the city stations with the aid of a 100m copper wire aerial strung between our house and an old dead gum tree. At night we could even listen to stations in Sydney, and on short wave we could hear signals from China and the US. We had a party-line telephone, but there was no television, and the postie delivered our daily papers a day late.

If nothing had advanced on that '50s

MARK DAY ON MEDIA



scenario, the bush would have cause for complaint. But communications have advanced amazingly, and the bush has not missed out.

In the last years of the 20th century I found myself spending weekends in a bush black spot — a little valley north of Sydney where radio services were weak and no acceptable terrestrial TV signals were available.

So we did what anyone, anywhere in the bush is able to do: we put a dish on the roof and got our free-to-air television off the Optus B satellite. This carries ABC and SBS in three time zones (eastern, central and western) which can be a big advantage over the city if you miss a program because it's repeated in half an hour, and again a couple of hours later.

We also had two commercial signals: Central Seven, out of Townsville, with Brisbane-based news and programming that mirrored the Seven network schedule, and Imparja, with its mix of Nine and Ten programs, out of Alice Springs. This was

particularly advantageous during the AFL season because we could access live games which were delayed or not shown on free-to-air in Sydney.

In all, there was nothing we could not see off the satellite, and much that was additional to Sydney's diet, including an eye-opening window on the outback way of life — advertising aimed at keeping Northern Territory communities off the grog, bull semen sales and heavy machinery wrecking services from Mt Isa.

When we added another dish for Foxtel we had all the TV services of the city.

For radio reception we rigged a 100m copper wire into the trees on the escarpment behind our house. It worked beautifully until a lightning strike evaporated the copper and fried the insides of the receiver. No matter, we could access a dozen or more audio formats via the Optus bird, and a further 30 on Foxtel. They may be a bit bland, and a poor substitute for an entertaining talk station, but they are there and accessible.

The choices available to bush audiences don't stop there. Most larger regional centres have telephonic exchanges capable of delivering ADSL broadband for internet access. It may not be the highest speed in the world (this is Australia, remember, where Telstra actually slows down its delivery speeds) but it is better than the old dial-ups we all used to

endure. In those places where ADSL is not possible, high-speed broadband can be delivered by satellite, using a standard telephone line as a back channel.

It is true that the cost of installing these technologies is generally higher than in the cities, but the cost of living in the bush is generally cheaper, so it evens-out in the long run. Besides, in my view the economic arguments don't wash because living in the bush is, for most people, a choice.

Having got this far, I can hear the Nats blustering: "Yes, those services are there, but they're not local."

Well, some are.

Some years ago I was involved in the independent Victorian ACE Radio network. It was at a time when the siren calls of satellites and new-fangled delivery systems, coupled with digital studio wizardry, were starting to be heard. There were obvious financial attractions in sharing programs, on-air voices and news, rather than running seven individual small businesses in seven locations.

Today it is still being done, and the biggest boy on the block, Macquarie Regional Radioworks, is copping a lot of flak for the way it does it.

But at ACE, these technologies enhance news services, not diminish them. In each location, ACE has at least one journalist covering the local beat and available to go to

air at any time with breaking news. Copy is sent to a hub station where it is read by the best "voice". Hence, a fully local three-minute bulletin, professionally read, is heard 28 times a day on AM stations and 16 times a day on FM, as well as national news on the hour sourced from 3AW in Melbourne.

ACE managing director Steve Everett says news amounts to about 5 per cent of each station's annual costs and attracts sponsors wanting their messages to be adjacent to news bulletins because of their increased "foreground factor" — that is, when people listen more intently than they do to music tracks.

If that is not enough for listeners to the ACE network, there's always the ABC. It has strong local AM stations in every region of the nation which do a great job, with very little recognition, covering the issues and the people of their service areas.

Then there's Radio National booming out from transmitters 10 times as powerful as the commercial sector, along with the ABC's all-news network, Triple J and Classic FM signals.

Add it all up and I find it impossible to believe the bleats of the Nats. For them, too much would be never enough.



mday@azemil.com.au