

# Unpacking the Media Reform Green Paper

## Australian chapter hosts important policy forum on the future of broadcast spectrum and local screen content rules

On 1 March, the Australian chapter held the [Unpacking the Green Paper forum](#), its first event for 2021, and first in-person COVID-safe event for some time. Hosted by longstanding IIC member [Telstra](#) at its Sydney Customer Insight Centre, the forum attracted more than sixty industry leaders from across broadcasting and telecommunications sectors and policy and regulatory agencies and consumer representatives.

The forum was timed to support responses to the Australian Government's Media Reform Green Paper [Modernising television regulation in Australia](#). Likely to be the first consultation in a multi-stage policy design process, the Government is seeking views on proposals to:

- offer commercial broadcasters a one-time choice to operate under a new type of licence, with a reduced regulatory burden, provided they agree to using less radiofrequency spectrum – and encouraging multiplex sharing
- investing proceeds of a resulting spectrum sale to fund trusts to support Australian screen content and journalism; and
- introducing an investment obligation for subscription and advertising video-on-demand services and adjusting obligations on national broadcasters with respect to Australian content.

The [keynote](#) was delivered by Michelle Rowland MP, Shadow Minister for Communications, who, among other things, noted:

- the importance of ongoing stable, ubiquitous and free terrestrial broadcasting services across Australia's vast land mass – especially during times of national emergency like bushfires and the COVID-10 pandemic;
- that while SVOD, BVOD, AVOD services, apps, websites and devices play an important role, not all Australians enjoy uniform service levels, and not all services are either free or equitably available – which makes the future of free terrestrial broadcasting important; and
- that she expected broadcasters would continue to leverage the linear window as an anchor to place and community, complemented by over the top services and connected devices.

Ms Rowland noted that a national transition to new broadcasting technologies involves complex engineering, economic and socio-political issues. She queried projections of a 600 MHz auction as soon as 2025, including because WRC-23 is set to review existing services using the 470-960 MHz band in Region 1.

A video of Michelle Rowland's speech is available [here](#).

The prospect of reduced channel offerings arising from spectrum changes was also discussed during two expert panel discussions, held under the Chatham House Rule. Bringing an international perspective – the Australian Chapter's point of difference in the jurisdiction – Peter Grant, a member of the Canadian Broadcasting Legislative Review Panel, joined the discussion live on the big screen. With Canada's review on similar content matters issuing its final report a little over a year ago, Peter's insights provided an important point of comparison.

Joining Peter were panellists from the commercial television industry group and public broadcasting, experts with regulatory experience in spectrum management, as well as screen production sector and public interest journalism advocates. Key insights included:

- A reminder that a Green Paper is an early-stage consultation vehicle – this will be a long conversation, and one that will require a holistic approach, rather than see some broadcasters transition to new technology while others remain on legacy platforms
- Telcos may not need 600 MHz spectrum just yet
- Efficiency benefits of MPEG-4 may have been overstated
- There is an argument that policy makers should be talking about growth rather than channel consolidation
- The popularity of SVOD services in Australia means they are an increasingly relevant and efficient pathway to audiences with local content
- There are benefits and challenges of different options should the Government wish to regulate streaming services – with some favouring requirements to produce and provide local content, not just contribute to a centralised screen production fund
- It is relevant to consider social and economic benefits of local content production, compared with economic benefits of service production – where a jurisdiction might be a cost-effective place to operate for content makers from other countries, but the content produced does not reflect local voices
- In establishing independent trusts to support screen content and journalism, certain structures can enable contributions to be accepted from government, industry and philanthropists