VODAFONE HAS BUSH BLINDSPOT

RRRCC says Vodafone campaign misses the mark on regional Australia

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The Rural, Regional and Remote Communications Coalition (RRRCC) says Vodafone Australia's latest 'comeback' advertising campaign, featuring comedian Ali Wong, has missed the mark, describing it as dismissive of the people, industries and communities beyond major cities, and those who rely on and travel through these regions.

The Coalition said any campaign that suggests there is "nothing out here" reflects a metro-centric view of Australia and ignores the reality of life in rural and remote communities, where reliable communications are not a luxury, but an essential service.

Rural and remote Australians are not a fringe audience to be laughed off. Nearly one in three Australians live outside major cities, including around 1.9 per cent in Remote and Very Remote areas, and they make an outsized contribution to the nation's prosperity.

Rural Australia is publicly credited with generating around 70 to 80 per cent of export income, nearly half of tourism income, and producing around 90 per cent of Australia's food. Yet these same communities continue to face poorer access to essential services, including communications and health care, and markedly worse health outcomes than their city counterparts.

However, there is growing frustration in the Bush that Australian telecommunications providers continue to present mobile coverage as near universal, while the lived experience in rural and remote Australia tells a very different story.

While Vodafone's campaign speaks to increased competition, many rural and remote Australians have no mobile coverage at all or rely on a single mobile carrier, with limited competition continuing to affect service quality, pricing and consumer experience outside metropolitan areas. Vodafone Australia claims its network covers 98.5 per cent of the population, but that remaining percentage represents hundreds of thousands of Australians living and working in some of the most remote and challenging parts of the country, the very areas where the campaign suggests 'there is nothing'.

It also implies these areas are adequately covered by another carrier, when in reality many communities face patchy mobile service or no coverage at all. By landmass, more than 60 per cent of Australia remains without mobile coverage.

RRRCC Secretariat Ms Danica Leys from the Country Women's Association of NSW said the ad was particularly disappointing because it mocked the very places and people who are the backbone of this country.

“There are families, workers, businesses and entire communities in rural and remote Australia who rely on connectivity every single day,” Ms Leys said.

“To imply these areas do not matter, or are somehow not worth investing in, is disrespectful and deeply out of touch.

“For people in the city, poor connectivity can be frustrating. For people in the Bush, poor connectivity can affect safety, education, health care, business operations and emergency response.”

The RRRCC said the issue was not corporate competition, but the message used to make the point.

RRRCC Chair Mrs Wendy Hick said rural and remote Australians were tired of being treated as an afterthought in the national telecommunications debate.

“This is not about whether companies compete hard on price or market share. It is about whether rural and remote Australians are treated with basic respect,” Mrs Hick said.

“Celebrating service for the 98 per cent while ridiculing the remaining Australians is not clever. It is exclusionary.

“In an era when businesses speak so often about inclusion and social responsibility, this kind of messaging is a serious misstep.”

The Coalition said communications infrastructure in the Bush underpins far more than convenience, supporting agriculture, freight, aviation, health, education, tourism, emergency management and the daily functioning of remote communities.

The RRRCC is calling on the Australian Government to move beyond consultation and into action, strengthening oversight, delivering targeted investment and progressing reform. In the absence of clear direction, industry is increasingly shaping the narrative around coverage, performance and investment, with real consequences for rural and remote Australians and First Nations communities.

Mapping the Digital Gap RMIT University Professor Lyndon Ormond-Parker said the Vodafone campaign failed to recognise the reality for many First Nations communities.

“Across thousands of rural and remote First Nations communities, the digital divide remains very real and access to reliable connectivity is still a challenge,” Professor Ormond-Parker said.

“Saying there is ‘nothing out here’ ignores these communities, including the 59 per cent of First Nations people living in regional and remote Australia. Messaging like this risks reinforcing the perception that these communities are not valued when it comes to essential telecommunications services.”

Ms Susi Tegen, RRRCC member and CEO of the National Rural Health Alliance, said rural and remote Australia was not a punchline.

“Rural and remote Australia feeds the nation, helps power the nation and protects the nation,” Ms Tegen said.

“From precision agriculture and drone technology to remote health services, logistics and schooling, people in these areas are using technology at a very high level, often in some of the most challenging operating environments in the country.

“Yet many rural and remote Australians still struggle to reliably access emergency services like triple zero, which is fundamental to health and safety. What they need from telecommunications companies is not mockery. They need investment, reliability and respect.”

The RRRCC said it would welcome advertising that reflected the value, contribution and modern reality of rural and remote Australia, rather than leaning on stereotypes.

Northern Territory business owner Jay Mohr-Bell said Vodafone should reconsider the message its campaign sends.

“Australia works best when we see ourselves as one connected country,” Mr Mohr-Bell said.

“Good telecommunications policy and good corporate citizenship should be about bringing Australia together, not reinforcing a divide between the cities and the communities beyond them.

“We would urge Vodafone to reflect on this campaign and on how it chooses to speak about the people who live outside metropolitan Australia.”

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About the RRRCC

The Rural, Regional and Remote Communications Coalition is an alliance of 21 organisations advocating for better telecommunications outcomes for people living and working in rural, regional and remote Australi

Regional, Rural & Remote Communications Coalition Members