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SUBMISSION
TO
THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON COMMUNICATIONS,
TRANSPORT AND THE ARTS
INQUIRY INTO THE ADEQUACY OF RADIO SERVICES IN
REGIONAL AND RURAL AUSTRALIA.
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Introduction

The rapid globalisation of trade, commerce and communications brings with it a potential to fragment, rather than enhance the sense of community. There is arguably now a greater need than ever before, for people to feel part of a local community, to interact with that community. Globalisation, competition, down-sized industry and outsourcing more and more isolates the individual in an increasingly casualised workplace.

This isolation is exaggerated in a rural setting, where face-to-face interaction has been further diminished by reduction in services such as banking. The loss of localism both in local services or media coverage of events underlines that isolation and contributes significantly to the decline in the social health of that community.

The human instinct is gregarious, to seek company, to share common stories. The loss of such opportunities reduces the well-being of the community and its individuals, especially in country areas where personal communication has historically been a vital “part of society.”

I often use the example of a local in Molong (Central West NSW), who enters the local papershop, has a yarn with whomever happens to be there, buys the (independent) Molong Express, Central Western Daily and Telegraph (or Sydney Morning Herald or Australian). That pattern alone tells a story.

The social instinct would dictate the newspaper purchaser would almost invariably peruse the local headline first, followed by the Orange daily, then the national paper. This sequence may have been somewhat upset in recent years by the drama and colour of the national paper’s front page, but I am convinced the “need to know local

first” is basic to our makeup as social beings, particularly in rural communities where familiarity with your neighbours and their activities is a fact of life.

Local is focal. That tenet applies equally to radio and television, but sadly these latter two media (and to some extent the group-owned country and suburban newspapers) are less and less providing what the social instinct craves - information about the familiar.

Some Comments On The Terms of Reference

1. Social Benefits And Influences On The Public Of Radio Broadcasting In Non-Metropolitan Australia In Comparison To Other Media Sectors.

As a former television and radio news editor in city and rural media I have a 25-year insight into the evolution of modern broadcasting in Australia. I have observed a gradual shift of emphasis from radio and TV licences being regarded as a privilege to their being regarded as a right.

Such an attitude has been fostered by the manner in which licences have become valuable commodities to be traded, more and more resulting in concentration of ownership, networking of television and radio, with country stations (TV and radio) becoming more and more slave stations of owners with more loyalty to bottom line profits than audience service.

It is sobering to refer to James Oswin’s in 1984 report “*Localism in Australian Broadcasting*”, the result of an inquiry commissioned by the then Communications Minister.

Among other things he says:

“whilst the origins of localism are rather vague.....in broad terms it refers to the notion that commercial (and as appropriate public and ABC) radio and television stations should be individually operated units located in as many areas as possible.”

Aggregation of television continues to destroy this admirable ideal. And multi licensing (and ownership) of radio is achieving much the same effect, by allowing *concentration* of both *ownership* and *location*, and a diminishing responsibility and sensitivity to the “social instinct” I referred to earlier.

As well Oswin says “*the buying and selling of licences for purely investment purposes, or trafficking as it is known in the United States, can be gravely damaging to localism both in metropolitan and regional areas and should be prohibited by legislation.*”

At page 5 of the Oswin report, the notion of localism implies that ownership and programming should be controlled at a local level and the programming should “*cater for the particular needs and interests of the community within the station’s service area*”.

Local demand dictates those ideals should still apply. The marketplace of 2000, however, dictates centralised control and profits should overrule local needs.

The Calare Electorate

The Calare electorate provides clear examples of the decline in localism in local commercial radio.

While Radio Station 2BS in Bathurst and its supplementary B Rock have maintained a very strong local content and employment, in Orange the transition from one AM station with a 60 year presence to one AM and two Commercial FM stations has resulted in a dramatic reduction in staff and local content.

I have raised concerns about the arrangements between the three Orange stations for sharing of staff and facilities. These are covered in Attachment 1, a letter to the Australian Broadcasting Authority and the reply.

2. Future Trends In Radio Broadcasting, Including Employment And Career Opportunities, In Non-Metropolitan Australian.

The decline in job opportunities in regional broadcasting are clearly observed in the recent history of Country Television Services/2GZ Orange where I worked for almost 20 years.

From a combined CBN/2GZ ownership and total staff around 150, the number of employees of the now Prime TV and the three commercial stations on the television/radio studio complex has now declined steadily. Instead of a local radio news service provided by the radio station journalist, this service is now provided to the competing commercial FM stations by a Prime TV journalist, with no local news on the AM station, which at the moment is a slave station of the Easy Listening network.

I don't believe the provision of a news service to commercially competing FM stations by a TV News room delivers anything approximating a competitive news or comprehensive service in the market. There is no way a TV station will divulge its top story when it is also competing in the television market with another station (Prime, Win).

While the Oswin report of 1984 acknowledged the growth of relay stations in the broadcasting system over the years "*providing high class city programs which were beyond the resources of individual stations*" until the 1990s such city programs were mostly a supplement to a strong local content.

Supplementary licences should be just that, supplementing the local services with some network "cherrypicking" of popular national programs. That was the original plan for regional television, to maintain the local control and programming of television within a viewing area. However, aggregation better suited the major networks, and we have seen the evolution of virtual slave stations in all markets.

In radio the same result is being achieved through a combination of supplementary licensing, networking and hubbing.

Oswin at paragraph 5.2 hoped in vain that:

“Radio stations have been almost totally local, particularly since the advent of television, and should remain so following the grant of supplementary licences.”

Similarly, another admirable Oswin ideal is being swept away, namely that *“the local sound of the station should predominate... which causes listeners in the area to be conscious they are listening to their station”*.

This is perhaps nowhere more noticeable than in the decline of localism on 1089 AM (the former 2GZ Orange).

Listeners find it almost impossible to associate with a local station if “local” commercials and community service announcements are prepared in another city, broadcast across a local listening area, making mistakes with street name and locality pronunciations, and having none of the familiarity with events, locations and people so vital to the true local “feel”.

3. The Effect On Individuals, Families And Small Business In Non-Metropolitan Australia Of Networking Of Radio Programming, Particularly In Relation To Local News, Sport, Community Service Announcements And Other Forms of Local Content.

There is little doubt the flexibility of a local station to deliver such local services is diminished by networking or hubbing.

The ability of Radio 2BS to provide immediate information on the Bathurst floods of 1986 and 1998 proved vital in helping coordinate emergency and police efforts. Similarly the emergency efforts surrounding the huge bushfires of 1987 in the Mt Canobolas area near Orange were helped enormously by the quick access to the local station.

The loss of local staff with local knowledge, and the automated network provided by modern technology greatly reduces the flexibility of a local station to deliver this sort of assistance to the community it services.

As in regional television post-aggregation, local sporting events or other major events are no longer covered by outside broadcasting units.

In Orange Star FM and 2GZ FM source 100% and 73% of their content from the network respectively, while 1089 (formerly 2GZ) AM would have 100% network material apart from local commercials.

But even with local commercials, the local “feel” of a voice-over is a vital part of the message for a local advertiser. To not have that element is to lessen the local flavour and its impact.

4. The Potential For New Technologies Such as Digital Radio To Provide Enhanced And More Localised Radio Services In Metropolitan, Regional And Rural Areas.

Others with more technical expertise will comment on this. However while new technologies could provide room for more “prepackaged” localism (such as pre-recorded news) the spontaneity of live radio and local voices is lost.

New technology (and its cost) will more likely result in an accelerated move towards more networking and less localism.

Adequate & Comprehensive

This was once the guiding light for determining localism at licence renewal hearings.

In the Broadcasting Act 1942 adequate and comprehensive service was defined in the following way.

“A reference in this Act (other than section 18A) to the provision by a licensee of an adequate and comprehensive service pursuant to a licence shall be read as a reference to the provision by a licensee of an adequate and comprehensive service, having regard to (a) the technical conditions of the licence warrant (b) the requirements of this Act and the regulations (c) the nature of the community to be served pursuant to the licence (d) the diversity of the interests of that community and (e) the nature of any other broadcasting services (including broadcasting services provided by the Corporation or the Service) having service areas that overlap the service area of the licence”.

In the Broadcasting Act 1992 the term *adequate and comprehensive* is used in Schedule 2 in relation to factors that the ABA must consider in granting licences.

“the licensee will provide a service that.....contributes to the provision of an adequate and comprehensive range of broadcasting services in that licence area”.

So, in the 1942 Act the term was used in the context of “the provision of” rather than in the 1992 legislation “contributing to” a broadcasting service.

By any judgement this waters down the quite specific requirements of earlier legislation pertaining to localism, leading to a situation now where it appears the 100% networking by some radio stations is regarded, in some strange way, as “contributing to” an adequate and comprehensive local broadcasting service!

It reaches the point where the commercial broadcasters in any one area could argue the regional ABC is providing “adequate and comprehensive” local coverage, so they (the commercials) need not.

When all available stations adopt this attitude, there is no outlet for local small business to advertise around a truly local format. In other words the commercial

market is “captive”, the operator pockets the advertising dollar, and any localism is manufactured, token, or non-existent.

Conclusion & Recommendation

The regional broadcasting industry was once one of the most dynamic industries in country Australia. It offered traineeships and cadetships for announcers, technicians and journalists, and contributed enormously to the fabric of rural living, quite apart from the local economy. Now profits are extracted from captive markets and largely distributed elsewhere.

The aggregation of regional television, rather than the more logical and socially desirable issuing of supplementary licences, began the decline of regional TV to the point where most stations are slaves of the three networks, with minimal local content and declining staff numbers.

Although the supplementary route has been taken in radio licensing, the advent of hubbing and networking, and the unbridled access by metropolitan and overseas-based investors to the industry has resulted in an outcome not dissimilar to the Regional Television aggregation story.

The Oswin report of 1984 concluded that “*great care will have to be taken to see that increased choice does not mean decreased localism*”.

That is exactly what has occurred, and that is why retention of localism will only be achieved by amending the legislation to ensure that all licensees provide an “adequate and comprehensive” local service in each licence area. It will also require stricter policing by the ABA to ensure the terms and conditions of issuing and holding broadcast licences are adhered to.

Respectfully submitted,

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