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Submission from Mr Jim Booth to:

Inquiry into Radio Services to Regional Australia

I wish to address some of the major changes in radio services in recent decades and the possible exacerbation of a 'decline in real localism' that could occur through further expansion of services available in many regional areas across Australia.

The major issues I want to cover relate to the *possible impact of new technology* and the *diversity and availability of radio services*. These are drawn from the major areas covered in Australian Broadcasting Authority investigations into licence area planning (LAP). A number of LAP investigations have taken place in regional areas.

It is clear technology has lead to greater opportunity for networks to reduce local presentation through networking and a number of forms of 'localisation' which may insert local weather, news, announcements and, of course, local advertising. The result is only just starting to be realised by regional audiences as the 'sound' has not changed greatly but the opportunity for real local input has declined.

Just as a community service obligation has been introduced for telecommunications services and there have been suggestions of a 'social contract' in which banks recognise their responsibility to local communities, so a similar obligation needs to be placed on commercial, community and government broadcasting services.

History: I have been closely involved in a number of radio services over the last 20 years, such as:

Radio UNE, Armidale – student broadcasting 1980/85
Radio 2LF, Young – news editor 1986/87
Radio 2WG, Wagga – news director 1988/90
ABC Radio Riverina – manager 1990/1995
Radio 2AAA, Wagga – board member 1996/2000
Media Booth – media monitoring service 1996/present

I have seen many changes in commercial, national and community radio over the last two decades and, while my experience has been mostly limited to southern NSW, my contacts throughout the industry have shown me the move away from localism has occurred across much of regional Australia.

By way of example, when employed at 2LF as the sole radio journalist, I worked in tandem with three other journalists in the 2WG newsroom in Wagga Wagga. These two services are now being covered by one journalist who has the additional responsibility of an FM commercial service in each of these centres.

I do not seek to blame Riverina Broadcasters or their current owners, DMG, for this change, but I pose the question: Can local audiences be better served when the previous ratio of two journalists per service is now reduced to one per four services?

I will concede that there are two extra ABC journalists working in Wagga Wagga than was the case ten years ago but they do cover the whole Riverina and they now broadcast less bulletins than was the case say in 1994.

While new technology will enable new low cost services to go to air and probably more 'information' to be broadcast, are we not losing our chance to reflect some of the 'diversity' of our local community in a bid to punch out more signals around the countryside?

Concern: Advances in technology have been driven by increasing labour costs and greater calls for commercial profits, or in the ABC's case, reducing real budgets, especially over the last decade. Any expansion of existing services or provision of new services will no doubt utilise the latest technology and, while they may provide a greater 'diversity' of signals in any area, I fear there will be no increase in 'service' to local radio listeners.

Profits: Populations in rural areas continue to decline and the larger cities are not growing at the rate they once did (except perhaps for Griffith). This means there is no great increase in the amount of money available in most local economies so size of the 'pie' is static yet we are contemplating more slices being added. These slices must be smaller and the only way to make profit is to keep cost as low as possible. The best way to do this is to introduce as much technology and as little labour as possible, but is this good for local content? By way of a further example, Wagga's community radio station, 2AAA, (of which I have been chairman and deputy chairman) only receives slightly more than ten per cent of its revenue through government grants, so the greater part (take out memberships and fundraising) must be found in the 'sale' of sponsorship announcements. While labour costs in this station are not high, reducing the size of 2AAA's slice of the pie may have a detrimental effect on the station's viability, its ability to purchase new equipment and therefore its ability to provide the alternative service that it has provided for nearly 20 years.

Technology: Computerisation in recent years means whole slabs of radio programming can be put together with nobody in a local studio so we are moving toward greater networks feeding basic programming with 'local' material inserted electronically. I understand the reason for this taking place and I'm certain the average listener won't notice the difference on most days, but there are certain things the computer can't do.

It can't answer the phone from the local sporting group informing of a cancellation or a bus running late from a sporting function out of town. It can't read the fax from the Weather Bureau informing of an approaching storm, or from the City Council informing of a closed road or the local police searching for a motorist. Fortunately bushfire announcements and other emergency information is broadcast less on the public airwaves than it used to be, but the capacity is nonetheless reduced. Unfortunately some of the above 'possibilities' have already occurred in Wagga Wagga in recent years and I have taken a few calls from emergency service personnel myself.

Localism: Sure, there are ways of funnelling this information to a central point for broadcast, but how often will an announcer in a far away location want to broadcast what may seem trivial or downright boring to the great proportion of listeners in other locations. Standby local staff can be brought in for an emergency, but this will take time and the 'cost factor' will prevent some of what would have gone to air in the past from going to air in the future. I do not believe it is possible to nowadays cover what has been taken for granted in the past.

To draw this a little further, anybody who has worked for many years in country radio will know how fiercely some listeners regard correct pronunciation of their local town, dam, river or road. I've taken many a call of complaint on this issue and an announcer in a far away location with no local knowledge is bound to make a mistake. In just the last week I've heard of one of the larger towns in the region, Tumut, pronounced more phonetically as *chew-mut*, referred to in an advertisement as *too-mut*. Now how do the thousands of people in this town feel when they hear this ad over and over again, and I wonder how good it must be for sales? While it may seem trivial, it goes to the heart of credibility of the information being provided and, if listeners start to question or can't understand what they are hearing, then there is no point in trying to broadcast it in the first place. We shouldn't however, give up.

While all of my comment so far has been directed toward radio, the area where I have mainly worked, I also see a reduction in local television services in recent years. Since aggregation we have seen Prime reduce localism to one news bulletin five days per week where there were once local children's programs and brief weekend news. WIN-TV has only come to the region with a service broadcast from Wollongong and Capital has not elected to start a local news service at all and has no studios in Wagga. I am not questioning the quality of these services, but has the expansion in broadcast licences provided the community any greater mirror on itself, or is the community happy to take more service in place of local service?

It's a hard question to answer but, having thought about it for some months, I suppose if someone in my position doesn't ask the question in submission form, then perhaps nobody else will, and I don't want to take that risk.

To draw this part to a close, technology, perhaps the greatest friend of the radio and television industry in recent years, and don't we all want the latest, is no doubt leading to a diminution of real local service that many of our country stations were built on over the last sixty to eighty years. So, there IS a different way of looking at the impact of new technology on the diversity of services.

If there is any doubt of the decline in local service, let me point you toward the Objects of the Act and challenge any reader of this submission to honestly answer the questions put below before discarding my assertions which may seem ultra-conservative, bemoaning the destruction of the 'parish-pump' or even a bit too NIMBY. If there is one thing to learn from 20 years in radio, it is that people will always regard the 'back yard' more highly than what is happening 'over there'.

Objects of the Broadcasting Act: To refer some of the above back to the objects of Section 160(a) as contained in the *ABA's General Approach to Analog Planning*, the Authority in its deliberations over the future of services in this region must ask the following questions part by part:

a) Are local services offering sufficient local *entertainment, education and information*?

b) Can the rural and regional broadcast industry develop in Australia when there are less and less people working in it and is it truly *responsive to audience needs*?

c) Do recent changes in ownership *encourage diversity in control*?

d) Do Australians have *effective control*, particularly as far as the Daily Mail Group is concerned?

e) Are broadcasting services reflecting a sense of local identity or even *Australian identity, character and cultural diversity*?

f) Can what we currently receive be described as *innovative programming*?

g) Have recent changes benefited the coverage of *matters of public interest* or *matters of local significance*?

h) Do broadcast providers respect *community standards*, and refer to my piece about pronunciation?

i) Have loud recent published *complaints about broadcasting services* been properly addressed?

The remaining sections, j-m, are probably for another forum, but we should be wary of the effect of possible future services on our younger population.

Regulatory Policy: I recognise that we should not *impose unnecessary financial and administrative burdens on providers of broadcasting services* and we cannot hold back the *development of broadcast technologies*, but we must remember we are talking about services to the community and I fear the real level of local service is declining. While *the radio industry should be expected to grow at the same rate as the economy generally*, the zone approach should be able to cater quite effectively to the fact that rural areas do not seem to be growing as the metropolitan areas are.

Community Service Obligations: As is done in the telephone industry, the Government needs the Australian Broadcasting Authority to look toward the provision of such obligations to halt the decline. The Australian broadcasting industry has for some years been required to play prescribed amounts of Australian music. Recent experience would suggest that prescribed amounts of local news, weather and community service announcements should be made in order to maintain a broadcasting licence in a regional area. The rationale behind this is that free-to-air radio and television services in regional areas are seen as a service. While commercial licences are still being traded for quite healthy sums, it is suggested these licences are certainly profitable, with money made from advertising in regional communities. These same communities should certainly expect the maintenance of news and information services. The industry has shown that it can't self-regulate in this regard so the government must be prepared to act to ensure regional populations are not disadvantaged.

Thank you for considering this submission,

Regards

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