

REPORT TO THE SENATE INQUIRY INTO BROADCASTING

Summary

1. This paper discusses the decline in programme standards for regional radio in inland N.S.W. with emphasis on the Dubbo region in particular. A list of suggestions is included that might remedy the situation.

2. Networking is outlined in the second part of this paper. I try to show that since the introduction of supplementary FM licences that networking has become the norm at the expense of the listener. Again a list of suggestions follow that would bring a satisfactory compromise to the regrettable networking situation we have at the moment in country Victoria, N.S.W. and Queensland.

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A DISCUSSION OF REGIONAL RADIO.

PART A: RADIO IN THE CENTRAL WEST OF N.S.W.

When I first came to Dubbo in 1989, there were 2 radio stations in this city, the ABC 2CR Orange transmitting from Cudal and commercial station 2DU transmitting from Eulomogo near Dubbo. Other stations with weaker signals could be picked up in Dubbo, but were hardly listenable.

Now in 2000, we have 10 stations: Tourist Radio FM88; 2KY Racing Radio; Zoo FM; Star FM; Radio Rhema; ABC Triple J; ABC Classic FM; Local ABC 107.1; ABC Radio National all on the FM band and commercial station 2DU on the AM band.

Frankly, the radio service for Dubbo was better in 1989 than it is now in 2000.

I wish to discuss each station individually and describe the service it provides to the public of Dubbo and surrounding areas. Generally, it is disappointing to see that the level of local service has decreased; yet the number of stations has increased.

Tourist Radio FM 88

This is a low powered station (1 watt) that provides a good service to tourists. It plays a blend of country music in between its tourist announcements. However, because of its low power, it can't be heard all over Dubbo, especially South Dubbo and it is only licensed to serve a limited audience. Many local people enjoy its country sound and have expressed the desire for a more localised service, including news, traffic and weather, for them and the tourists. Most people complain that they can only hear it in their car.

2KY Racing Radio

This is a well-liked service in Dubbo and the surrounding district for racing fans. It is appreciated and because of its transmission power [100 watts], it can be heard inside homes. Racing radio is fully networked from 2KY in Sydney.

ZOO FM

This is the supplementary licence of Radio 2DU which is part of the Bill Caralis network. It provides 24-hour music which is contemporary in nature. It runs live from 6am to 6pm Monday to Friday and 6 to 12 Saturdays. The remaining time is networked from 2SM in Sydney. It provides an hourly news service of about 3 minutes. The news is lightweight in nature, brief and has a general coverage of state, interstate and overseas news. Its sports coverage is very basic. ZOO FM runs local news weekdays, again brief and general. Their sporting coverage, locally, is restricted to their news services. They run limited community announcements and when they are "live" from Dubbo, they will broadcast some notices regarding rainfall, approaching storms, road conditions, flood warnings and bushfire warnings. Their program emphasis is music and competitions to attract listeners. Their community involvement is to run a "Zoo Cruiser" around Dubbo, not even to surrounding towns such as Wellington and Narromine, to give away prizes or "freebie" promotional items.

Star FM

This station is the newcomer to Dubbo. It opened earlier this year as the second supplementary license for Dubbo. It is owned by DMG [Daily Mail Group]. Star FM broadcasts live from 6am to 10am weekdays and is networked the rest of the day. It is disappointing to have a new radio station come to the area and provide the same music virtually as ZOO FM, the same format, the same sort of generalised wishy, washy news, both national and local, and the same sorts of competitions and prize give-aways. Star FM provided nothing new or exciting in terms of regional broadcasting. The same program can be heard quite clearly from their Orange transmitter, except for the local four hours in the morning.

Star FM brought little employment to Dubbo, just a station manager, 2 announcers and a journalist, plus 2 sales staff. All the production, ie, the making of advertisements, promos and pointers are produced in Albury at what DMG call "The Hub". Already, advertisements have been played with mispronunciations of Dubbo streets and nearby towns or just plainly wrong, for example, advertisements being played, after an event is over or has been cancelled due to poor weather conditions. The station is, I believe, a poor network extension of the Star FM regional station line up. It is a moneymaking operation that takes money from this area and offers very little in return by way of serving this community.

Radio Rhema

This station operates on full power (10 kw), the same as Zoo FM and Star FM. It operates on the community licence issued to the Dubbo community. I understand that because no community group took up the option of this licence other than Radio Rhema, this is why it was permitted to go ahead. The programming on this station is automated 24 hours a day, 7 days a week - Christian music and preaching. While there is nothing wrong with this as such, it does limit its options as far as a community station goes. Its limited audience, because of its programming, does not make it the general community station that it should be. What is of concern here, is that if another community group wanted to set up a radio station and challenge the validity of this licence, what chance would they have now that Radio Rhema is so entrenched?

Triple J

ABC radio's youth network is well listened to by local youth. There is some complaint that the music is being played by 20 plus announcers to a 20 plus audience and the 14 to 18's are being forgotten. Generally, high school students listen and like it. Some comments I've had also indicate that the news, infotainment and band gig guides are much better than the local commercial FM stations.

Classic FM

This has a limited audience but seems well received by the cultural groups around Dubbo that I contacted. Listeners appear to be pleased to have Dubbo weather reports included at breakfast time.

Local ABC

The ABC107.1 FM station became an extension of 2CR AM in the mid-nineties. It provides a local breakfast program with a mainly rural emphasis. It includes good weather reports, market information, a rural report, linked community announcements and of course, news. ABC 107.1 FM for the remainder of the day is networked from 2CR Orange until 11am and then from 2BL 702 Sydney except for the 3pm to 6pm state regional program. ABC107.1 FM is networked from 2CR Orange or from 2BL 702 at weekends for the breakfast program and during the rest of the day.

It should be noted that the Grandstand program from 702 2BL Sydney which no longer has horse racing has not created a problem locally because of racing radio 2KY.

Radio National

This needs little explanation except that from information I have tried glean from people in Dubbo, it appears it is hardly listened to.

Radio 2DU AM

2DU was the only commercial broadcaster until the late-nineties in Dubbo. Like other areas of similar size, commercial FM licences were issued by the Australian Broadcast Authority [ABA] and because of this, 2DU changed. As a solus station 2DU, like 2GZ in Orange, was 'all things to all people' and over many years of broadcasting, 2DU became part of the community. It took network programs, for example; talk back, John Laws, Alan Jones and the like, a good news service from 2UE Sydney and before that, Macquarie 2GB. 2DU also broadcast good local information and plenty of it.

To do this cost money and 2DU was repaid handsomely by local advertising support. Now that commercial FM has appeared, the local station has lost its lustre, as the dollars are just not there.

Despite arguments by 2DU management claiming nothing has changed, it has. The combined effect of the supplementary FM licenses and being taken over by the Caralis organisation, 2DU's programming has declined overall and specifically in three major areas, news, community service announcements and activities as well as outside broadcasts.

Before I detail these three areas, it should be noted that when Mr Caralis took over 2DU, he did introduce a midnight to dawn service (networked from Radio 97 Tweed Heads) something Dubbo had not had before on a regular basis from 2DU.

The news service on 2DU has declined. When Mr Caralis bought 2SM, he established a network from this station to incorporate his country stations. With this network came his news service, his network talkback show (Howard Satler) and his network music shows.

The main reason this network was established was as a cost cutting exercise. Mr Caralis claimed the 2UE news service was too expensive and he could do his own for less. Well he has done that. The news has fewer voice inserts, shorter, less detailed stories and the sports reports are glib, generalised and not nearly as extensive as 2UE. In general, a decline in a once high standard of news on 2DU.

Local news has remained the same, although now as a cost cutting measure, if one journalist goes on leave, the other is left to do the work of two on the two stations, ZOO FM and 2DU and for those weeks, there is an obvious decline in standards. I have also heard one network newsreader's voice doing commercials and certainly one of the journalist's voices on 2DU doing commercials as well. Another cost cutting measure? Hardly conducive to good journalism, having time divided like this.

Community service on 2DU used to involve radio appeals, outside broadcasts and one for one advertising. All this has virtually ceased. Any community activity that can't be sold does not get to air. 30 second community announcements still get to air and 2DU is fortunate that it still retains live broadcasting from 6am to midnight weekdays, and 6am to 6pm weekends for these announcements to be made. Sometimes, at the discretion of the morning announcers, community interviews will be given, but it is very arbitrary and again, if the story is good and there is a chance of an advertising package adjoining it, then it will get priority.

Outside broadcasts used to be a feature of 2DU's involvement in Dubbo and the outer listening area. Some were aligned with store openings or store sales, some with sporting events, race meetings, football and cricket and some were purely to promote surrounding towns and their activities. The decline here is pronounced. Cobar is part of the 2DU, Zoo FM area, both stations have translators in the town. 2DU used to visit Cobar on a regular basis - a costly exercise, once or twice a year. This no longer happens for Cobar or any other outlying town. Again, cost cutting. OB's to sporting events are now a mobile phone cross and not the full caravan broadcast. All outside broadcasts now are sales orientated at stores and the like. There is no community involvement here as there used to be.

2DU is "lucky" in that it is still allowed to be local for most of its broadcast hours. This is not the case with the smaller network stations within the Caralis network. I will detail this further in my networking submission (Part B).

In summary, although Dubbo has 10 radio stations providing a level of service to the community which leaves much to be desired. The idea of extending a larger range of radio services to many regional areas of Australia may have been good in theory. In reality, it falls a long way short of the real local service that once existed, if the Dubbo experience is anything to go by.

What to Do.

1. The ABC

The Triple J, Radio National and Classic FM networks are not really part of this inquiry, so I will not comment here.

ABC local radio 107.1/2CR does a reasonable job for what is intended of them. However, their consistent plugging of “your local radio” is a farce, considering the large areas they cover and the amount of real local time each station gets. In Dubbo’s case, 6.15am and 7.45am and then 8.30am to 11am combined with 2CR Orange, hardly makes ABC 107.1 Dubbo local! The ABC needs to review 107.1 and its local output plus give it a signal that can be heard in South Dubbo.

2. Commercial FM

The Zoo FM, Star FM licences need a review. Why should Dubbo have more of the same? Star FM should be made to provide a different program of music to Zoo FM and its sister station in Orange, 105.9. Star FM should be at least local from 6am to 6pm, 6 days a week and 6am to noon on Sundays, as should Zoo FM.

Both stations need to have their local news and community service commitments codified by this inquiry report to the ABA to at least 5 minutes per hour. Both stations need to have in place arrangements with staff to be able to go to air locally the moment a flood, fire, traffic or other emergency happens.

Both stations need to have an adequate answering service for out of hour’s inquiries to help the public, not just refer on telephone numbers for their sales staff and advice to find emergency services in the phone book.

Both stations need to have more of a commitment to their target audiences which are basically the same 20 to 49 year olds, than telling them on air “we play

the best music” or that we have a “new” look and backing up these claims with prizes and giveaways. They need to become really local.

Both stations virtually ignore the outlying towns such as Wellington, Gilgandra, Narromine, Warren and Cobar, just to name a few.

Both stations don't advertise themselves at all well in newspapers, on billboards, television or leaflets, as to what their programs are, who their presenters are, their frequencies, their news and “information” times or anything. Is this their idea of having people listen longer, in case they might find out something or is it that these stations are just there to make money and “to hell” with the public, they'll have what we give them?

Competition in regional commercial FM radio has brought a mediocrity in service through a dilution of the static advertising dollar being spread over more stations. A regrettable situation.

3. Community Radio

Radio Rhema needs to have its licence placed under review immediately as it is not serving the wider community. Minority groups such as the disabled, aborigines, sports other than the big 3 (racing, cricket and football), musical groups, cultural groups and other religions are not featured on Radio Rhema. It is not a true community station. It should have a licence to broadcast by all means, perhaps at 87.6 or on another narrowcast frequency.

4. Tourist Radio

The FM 87.6 or FM 88 concept is a good one, except that its transmission power is limited. The power of these stations needs to be increased to allow the service they provide to be heard better. For example, in Dubbo, tourist radio cannot be heard inside motel rooms a kilometre away from the transmitter. Also, Road Conditions Radio on the Newell Highway between Parkes and Dubbo is so weak the signal runs out before the messages do.

- The power of these stations needs to go to 100 watts.
- Their aerials need to be arranged so there is no interference between towns.
- The program content needs to be expanded to incorporate a news service if desired, a specialised music selection, for example, jazz or country and western, a specialised sports program, “what's on” segments, road conditions and a weather service.

The FM 87.6/FM 88 concept as already stated, is a good one. It should be noted that in Narromine the FM 88 station broadcasts tourist information. The station is sponsored by the Narromine Shire Council. It has in conjunction with the operators of the licence, Western Visitor Radio, set up a studio to transmit messages in times of emergency. The arrangement is that the Shire goes live to air to tell people what the problem is, they play music in between and return to normal tourist program once the crisis has past. Again, a good utilisation of radio except that the signal is so limited that the people in nearby Trangie or Tomingley, towns within the Shire, would be none the wiser because they can't hear FM 88.

In conclusion, radio in Dubbo is a hotch potch of mediocrity.

- We have 2 commercial FM stations competing against each other for a limited audience. Worse still, they are trying to sound like city stations. They show no individuality, they lack direction and they are not genuinely local in content and only intermittent attempts are made to try and sound part of the community.
- We have a community station that is representative of only a minority within the community.
- We have a tourist station that can't be heard inside buildings.
- We have a hybrid "local" ABC station that gives Dubbo and the west limited time at breakfast and that can't be heard in South Dubbo.
- We have the local AM station trying to serve the community while actually being run to finance a network and its supplementary station Zoo FM. The diversion of money away from 2DU has reduced and watered down its once good program content.

I urge this inquiry to have the ABA review its current licensing policies and to review its program requirements for commercial, narrowcast and community radio. In Dubbo, even the basics outlined in the ABA guidelines are not being followed.

Finally, if commercial stations claim it is too expensive to go local and become part of the community, then this inquiry should recommend they either close down or hand over their licence to another organisation who would be prepared to make a go of it. Either way, we would get the radio we deserve and should have in Dubbo, even if we have fewer radio stations.

PART B: NETWORKING

Networking has been a part of commercial radio ever since I have been involved in this industry. It has some very good points to offer commercial regional radio such as:

- It allows capital city programs of high ratings to be relayed to country stations, namely talkback and news.
- It enables small stations to remain on air 24 hours a day with network based evening and early morning shows.
- It offers a larger variety of presenters to country stations.
- It enables stations to take syndicated Top 40, country and special music shows.
- It allows stations to relay special events and sporting programs for example, cricket, football, even the Olympics in some cases.

Generally, networking can be good for commercial regional radio and in the past it has been.

Since the introduction of the supplementary FM licences to country areas, networking has become the norm for both AM and FM and has taken over regional radio to the detriment of service to local listeners.

With the advent of more sophisticated computer programs over the past five years, radio stations can be run remotely by satellite for days on end with no live presenters. This is the case with 2PK Parkes and 2MG Mudgee, where over the Christmas break they ran from 6pm 24/12/99 to 6am 28/12/99.

On long weekends it is not uncommon for small stations to run from midday Saturday to early Tuesday mornings. No local content and no up to date

information regarding roads, the weather, sporting cancellations, “what’s on” or the like.

Worse still, because networks go interstate, time calls during daylight saving are either non-existent or generic, eg, “it’s 6 past the hour” - what hour?

Weather forecasts are generalised, eg, “for the west today it will be fine with some thunderstorms expected in some areas.”

The Caralis network and the DMG networks which dominate a great deal of NSW, VIC and QLD, have stations that are so close together, the same program can be heard all over. For example:

- FM 105.9 Orange and FM 93.5 Dubbo - the Star FM network from 10am weekdays to 6am the next day, the same program.
- 2MG Mudgee and 2PK Parkes, both received in Dubbo, have the same program at weekends during the day and 2DU joins this relay at night from 6pm. Where is the variety and localism here?
- The Parkes, Mudgee, Gunnedah, Inverell and I think Tamworth FM stations of the Caralis network are all the same after 2pm on some weekdays.
- 2MO Gunnedah and 2TM Tamworth, geographically very close together both originally established to serve their communities are now on the same relay network for large amounts of weekday and weekend time slots.

The problem of advertising with networking has been overcome thanks to computers. Originally, an announcer was employed to play the ads, give the time and weather etc from the local studio and then physically “cross back” to the network.

Now timed breaks of 2 minutes or longer can be started by the network announcer. Each station’s computer plays the local ads and then crosses back after the timed break. For larger stations their ad breaks are exactly that, but for the smaller stations with fewer ads, their breaks have to be filled with free general state or national community service “fillers”, that is Red Cross, Salvation Army appeals, Blind Society and so on. These breaks may also be filled with station pointers describing a regular item heard on that station.

The problem is not that these ‘fillers’ are being played, it is the constant repetition. Small stations don’t have large numbers of ads and as stated, they have to fill with something and they do. For the listener, these boring repetitious announcements would not go to air if the station were on live with a local announcer, as he/she would have less breaks per hour.

With so much networking going on, the chances for announcers to get a start in the industry are now more limited than ever. With more stations than ever on air, with competing stations the word in the industry is "only announcers with experience need apply." With networks expanding, new announcers are just not being employed because a computer can do it just as well and much more cheaply.

The expansion of the Caralis network needs special mention as it has completely ruined many good local AM radio stations. In this network, the larger profitable AM stations have been left alone a little, namely Dubbo, Lismore, Moree and to a lesser extent, Tamworth and Armidale.

Smaller network stations such as Parkes, Mudgee, Gunnedah, Inverell, Grafton and Gympie are being run on a shoestring. Local services have been cut and local programming only takes place during the profitable hours of the day, that is, 5.30am to about 2pm. They are no longer true commercial community driven radio stations in these towns.

The final insult to listeners came when what was a regional network with country music, local evening talkback, was cut off with little explanation in January this year because 2SM Sydney suddenly became the originating station. The music changed to a selection of "hits and memories", the talkback at night involved city listeners as well as country ones and the announcers put a "city" feel into the programs.

All this was done because "you can't make money out of country music." This statement was made by Mr. Bill Morrison, Manager of Radio 2TM. Ironic, in that he has been associated with that station since the inception of the Tamworth Country Music Festival. It was 2TM for years who promoted and lived off country music with its very popular night time country music "hoedown" show. For many years, 2TM hosted the Golden Guitar awards for country music and relayed this program all over Australia. I understand that listeners to 2TM are still bitter about the January change to 2TM, and rightly so.

The news services provided by the networks DMG and Mr Caralis in this area are very poor. Again, they are run on the cheap and it sounds like it. Short stories, few inserts and a very poor score service with sports. If you read the Daily Telegraph while listening to these news services, the similarity in story approach and written expression is quite amazing. It is a wonder Media Watch haven't picked up on this plagiarism.

Regarding the Caralis network, questions must be asked as to how much money from regional NSW and Queensland stations went into his purchase of 2HD Newcastle and then 2SM in Sydney to establish his network?

How much money did the Caralis network save by dropping the very good 2UE news and sporting service and replacing it with his own second rate service?

Why didn't the Caralis or DMG networks in Dubbo broadcast the Olympics to any great extent? The 2UE network allowed 2GZ FM (DMG) in Orange to do it. Again, saving money?

How many new announcers directly from radio school have these networks employed in the past twelve months? How many A and B grade journalists do they employ in their regional stations?

Has there been a reduction in journalistic staff over the past twelve months in these networks in real terms or have the same number of journalists been spread over more stations?

In conclusion, networking had its good points until the advent of the supplementary FM licences. Now, it is being over used to save money and to run radio stations for maximum profit at the expense of the listener. Very, very regrettable.

What to do:

- limit networking to 6pm to 6am weekdays and noon to 6am weekends and public holidays.
- Insist that each station carry one trainee announcer and one trainee journalist as well as a full compliment of on air staff. This requirement should be insisted on for the sake of continuity within the broadcast industry.
- Make talkback programs at night regional in nature and leave the "city" out until after midnight.
- Make stations have a larger music variety on both the AM and FM networks because people in the country tend to listen longer to radio. Insist on a high (25%-35%) Australian content in music.
- Enforce the return of the longer 12 noon, 5pm and 6pm news bulletins on the AM stations that lost these bulletins when 'cheaper' news services were introduced such as those on the Caralis network.
- Make FM stations have a window of news and local news and community information and good local weather of at least 5 minutes duration per hour from 6am to midnight weekdays to 6am to 6pm weekends. Half hour breaks

of similar duration should be insisted on at 6.30, 7.30 and 8.30am every morning.

- Make stations give proper time calls including the hour, during daylight saving and give detailed local weather forecasts.
- Have stations on relay switch their phones to someone within the station or at home to take and answer inquiries and if need be, break the program with important announcements.

These suggestions I hope will form the basis of some of the aspects being investigated by this inquiry.

Finally, I have a real desire to see this inquiry work to reshape regional commercial radio into what the ABA originally intended with its allocation of supplementary licences. I don't want to see the inquiry become a witch-hunt into the current licence holders. It is to be hoped that by suggestions and encouragement, perhaps backed up with legislation, that the ABA can have the networks and networking regulated for the benefit of all parties.

As I stated in Part A, if the commercial radio industry doesn't want to come to the party and give country listeners what they want and deserve, then the stations should be closed until other organisations can be formed to run them.

If there are too many stations in one area that make it not profitable for one or two to survive, then let one shut down or amalgamate in order that quality broadcasting be returned to "the bush."

POSTSCRIPT

I have worked in radio for 25 years, the majority of those years in the country.

I was employed by 2DU, as a talkback host for ten years. I left 2DU on amicable terms to contest the state seat of Dubbo for the National party at the last election. I lost by fourteen votes.

I currently consult for Western Visitor Radio FM 88 and run my own production company, Richard Mutton Promotions.

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