

Commercial Radio Industry Inquiry
Mr Paul Neville MP, Chairperson
Members of the Board
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

15th October 2000

Dear Sirs

It is acknowledged by long term credible and experienced radio industry members that regional commercial radio is an essential service for a regional community. It not only provides entertainment, news, sport, current affairs and information, but also employment, financial input into the area, and safety and security to each sector of the community. Radio is as much a part of the everyday lifestyle as anything could be expected to be. It is far more immediate than other media, such as newspapers and television, whereby it can respond instantly to a communities needs any time of the day or night, 7 days per week. Radio has the advantage that a message can be delivered to many people at the one time, and only live and local radio can do this efficiently and immediately. Radio is the most accessible form of community communication and service available readily today, and it must be preserved for the immediate and future generations.

Multi-national companies and corporations are today destroying this 'traditional' view of commercial radio. They capitalise on network-based operations, for so-called efficiency and productivity. Listeners are beginning to discover they cannot rely on their 'local' radio service, for it no longer delivers the same level of service it once did. They basically understand, unfortunately, that this is 'as good as it gets'. That is, multi national operations, with minimal live local content, restricted community service obligations, limited investment/spend dollars being directed towards the local community from which it originated, and limited local employment prospects.

This is simply not the way in which local radio should operate.

Radio belongs to the individual local community(s) to which it serves. It does not belong to a foreign owned corporation, who is not concerned, even unaware of an individual communities needs.

It should not belong to a company that is unaware of the impact of networking on regional employment and investment opportunities in that community nor a company who possesses an apparent disregard for totally committed, live and local community service.

Translated, community service is commitment to the stations regional broadcast area. Not simply supporting this group, or giving air-time to that group, but being available instantaneously whenever any sector of the community asks for assistance. Today, this time-honoured industry standard of being 100 percent committed to community needs, 24 hours per day, seven days per week, is not being fully adhered to. You may call some stations after hours, and the phone is not even answered by a machine, let alone an employee. How then, can the individual who relies on radio as a 'friend', a companion for advice, information and local awareness contact the station for advice concerning, say, the approaching localised storm? Or the bushfire that's burning near her farm?

This person may not be able to read the phone directory to find the stations after-hours number, for whatever reason, and by the time the storm or fire hits, the on-call announcer is still driving to the station, or trying to decipher the property and district name of a town 100 km from him that he's never ever heard of.

These profit-driven, locally unaware and unconcerned type radio operations will eventually cost someone their life. It simply translates, that most people trust and rely on radio. The time will arrive, however, when these people do not receive information important to their survival, (this being due to there being no employees at the station, and no easily accessible and understood method to convey the correct procedure for contacting their station after hours) and the whole community, through the 'local' stations' cost-cutting and claimed better efficiency and productivity will be unaware, delayed and not adequately serviced. They will be effected by no fault of their own, simply a 'better', 'higher quality' service, or so we are told.

Take for example the Daily Mail Group.

DMG are a foreign owned company, with their main base located in Britain, UK. They own numerous assets, including The Daily Mail newspaper along with many other electronic and print media interests, and are reported to be worth an estimated 8 billion dollars.

However, 58 of these ‘assets’ are located in regional Australia, throughout New South Wales, Western Australia, South Australia, Queensland and Victoria and many are being ‘under-utilised’ for the purpose that they were initially designed.

They are all extensively networked, which has had a negative impact on many of these stations credibility and local-based, on-going community support. That is, local employment, 24 hour local awareness and community commitment. Three main ‘rules’ surrounding radio.

DMG claim to be committed to localism in regional radio but their basic, limited approach to ‘supporting’ community service and their non-committed attitude to their wide-coverage audience is a disgrace to radio in general. Undermining the essence of radio is one issue, but when a community is exploited to provide a revenue-raising operation for a foreign-owned company and when only minimal profits derived from the community are re-invested into the local economy and jobs are ‘taken away’, it’s very un-Australian and a great disappointment to true local station owners and operators, who’s stations may not earn huge incomes, but survive amicably, ethically and provide a first-class broadcasting service to the community which supports them.

In immediate area of the Riverina, DMG entered the market by ‘buying-out’ the ‘assets’ of AMI Media, based in Griffith, for example 2RG(+FM sup.), 2WG(+FM sup.), 2LF(+FM sup.) and a number of other media interests. They made redundant around half of the existing staff, including some who had over 10 years experience and devotion to the one station. This was done in the name of ‘attracting higher quality announcers’, ‘better production standards’ and generally, in their view, a much better, fresher adequately locally focused service. They removed most of the live components, leaving only breakfast AM and FM; mornings, AM only until 2PM and the rest of the day, right through the state to Coffs Harbour, originating from Albury.

They have even fully automated 2LF Young’s FM supplementary 24 hours per day, 7 days per week. There are no Young-based FM announcers or FM staff at all, simply a satellite program originating from Albury.

Why has this occurred without any industry reviews sooner? How can a foreign-owned company simply take away live and local independent Australian regional radio from the towns and cities it serves?

And, how can AMI Media and DMG operate under a 'similar' banner, assisting each other with commercial license accumulation when the government through past inquiries has cleared them of any wrongdoing? They are devious, and will eventually discover localism, loyal and trusting commitment from the community to the station and return is much more powerful than corporatisation, centralisation and networking.

The ownership rules of radio must change. Regional populations cannot afford to compete for ownership of radio license against these big multi-nationals. Sure, keep the price-based allocation system operating for metropolitan commercial licences to a certain extent, but award regional licences, depending on circumstances, to the most suitable applicant, similar to the community license allocation process, and similar to the method used for commercial license allocation in the past.

This is predominately the easiest and most effectual method of returning radio to live and local broadcasting for the betterment, comfort, companionship, safety and service to the local community.

Riverina Radio Pty Ltd would like the opportunity to present information to the inquiry, which we believe will prove the outright the deceitful, inefficient and uncommitted attitude of various past and present local license holders in our area. We would welcome the opportunity to attend a private hearing at your advice so our case may be presented.

We are proud to be associated with the Commercial Radio Inquiry, and we, along with much support from our region and beyond, hope the anticipated outcome will be a brighter future for regional radio; for employment within the industry, viability of each individual station in it's local economy, and better access for local business to own and operate successfully, their own local commercial radio station.

Yours faithfully

DAVID EISENHAUER
On behalf of Riverina Radio Pty Ltd.

Email: radio@wagga.net.au

Postal: Riverina Radio Group
Reply Paid 300
Koorringal
Wagga Wagga
NSW 2650