

RMB 1760
Myrree
Vic 3732
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Phone/fax 0357297519

Mrs Janet Holmes
Secretary
House of Representatives Standing Committee on Communications, Transport, and the Arts
Parliament House
Canberra
ACT 2600

Dear Mrs Holmes

I would like you to bring to the attention of the Committee what is happening to ABC Regional Radio in Victoria, and in particular to the program changes implemented early this calendar year.

I should say at the outset that I am a regular unpaid correspondent on CO FM, the ABC regional radio service which broadcasts from Albury/Wodonga and Shepparton. I was approached about two years ago to talk about viticulture and wine, and have enjoyed doing a short segment with the presenter each fortnight. I undertake this small regular assignment to inform listeners about wine, and hope to promote this very important local industry by keeping relevant issues in the public arena. The concern I have about the future of Regional Radio is not influenced by this involvement with the station.

You will be aware that this station has a long and proud record providing outstanding service to the local community. It has been my family's main source of news and information for well over 60 years. You will understand that we feel we are shareholders in the station. We welcome changes which improve the quality of the output, but do not want to lose the strong regional accent.

You will understand my surprise when I heard that the local content was to be reduced. It had been decided in Melbourne that the main morning program (from 9.00 am to 11.00 am) was to come from Melbourne. The local program was being moved to the afternoon to a shorter time slot, and at a time when the total listening audience is much lower. This afternoon time slot is also often replaced by what is regarded as higher priority content from the State or National networks, for example, by the cricket. I should add that afternoon programs are traditionally more lightweight in content, and by their very nature are generally not as concerned with serious local issues.

At the time, I could not imagine that the ABC management would make a deliberate decision which would reduce their participation in local affairs. In the event, this decision has also reduced the quality of the program. As a consequence of these two factors, the station appears to have lost substantial market share after 9.00 am when the Melbourne presenter comes on air (by about 25% according to the competition). This has been achieved without saving any money as far as I can see.

The decision to introduce the Melbourne based program in place of a truly regional program was made without the community or local staff participating in the decision making processes. This lack of involvement has an adverse effect on the community confidence,

bringing a sense of powerlessness, and the impression that other people in the Capital cities know best about what services local people want.

All regional communities are suffering from the slow withdrawal of services 'economic rationalism' bites in the bush. People who are driven principally by economic criteria make many of these decisions, usually in the Capital cities. Some other reductions in local services are the result of choices made by local communities. The aggregation of many outcomes that result in a diminution of local services slowly destroys active and mutually supportive local communities, and can introduce a sense of hopelessness amongst some people. Many of these decisions may be commercially justifiable, and may also be inevitable.

This ABC decision has the same effect. However, it can not be justified on economic, or any other, grounds. Further, I do not feel that the change was made with the interests of the listeners in mind. The decision is either just a whim of management, or it is a prelude to eliminating this regionally focused program in order to save the costs of the presenter and the producer at each station.

In regard to the program, it can not possibly be regional if it attempts to cover country Victoria. The issues of concern in Geelong and Ballarat and other Western Victorian towns are not relevant to Gippsland or the North East or the Southern Riverina, and vice versa.

The previous locally based morning program was informative, entertaining, well produced and well presented. The current program is by comparison lightweight in style and content, and would be much better suited to a late afternoon time slot. It might have been designed to allow the ABC to reach a segment of the potential listening audience which wants something less challenging than the current Jon Faine program on 3LO 774. Whatever, it certainly is not regional, and it does not appeal to what was the established audience. The ABC has lost market share, relevance, and influence.

It may have been that the local morning programs emanating from the other stations in the ABC regional network were not of an adequate standard, and not having listened I have no opinion on this. If this was a problem the changes was meant to solve, surely this should have been directly addressed by training or changing the presenters, producers, or by whatever management action was necessary. The CO FM morning program may have been in need of fine-tuning, but it did not need to be removed from the prime listening time to a time when the audience is significantly smaller.

I believe a strong ABC presence in regional radio is very important for local communities, and hope that you and your Committee will be able to investigate the matter on their behalf. The ABC simply can not survive as an important regional radio service in the face of the very focused commercial stations if it continues with its current strategy.

Yours faithfully,

Peter Read