

**INQUIRY INTO THE ADEQUACY OF
RADIO SERVICES
IN
NON-METROPOLITAN AUSTRALIA**

SUBMISSION

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Introduction

Charters Towers is a rural centre of approximately 9,500 population in its local authority area and is situated in the centre of the Dalrymple Shire, which has a population of approximately 4,300. The nearest provincial city is Townsville 132km to the North-east. Charters Towers is situated on the Townsville-Mt Isa railway line and the Flinders Highway. The regional industries include beef cattle grazing, horticulture, mining, education, light engineering and health.

Radio Services

The area is served by ABC (AM and FM) and Radio 4GC (AM and FM) which is a part of DMG Radio. Other services, both AM and FM, transmitted from Townsville are received.

Submission

ABC Radio. It is submitted that the current ABC service is generally adequate in programming terms, though the AM transmission power is sometimes a source of frustration. This is especially so when the reception capabilities of the more modern motor vehicle radios and some of the smaller household units, are considered. The signal level appears to be lower than it should be, resulting in considerable interference being experienced, especially in the vicinity of high voltage power lines (Hackett Terrace is a prime example) and in the vicinity of the local Post Office and Telephone Exchange from where electronic emissions emanate. Distance and transmission power appear to be the governing factors, as the reception improves along the Flinders Highway as one travels towards Townsville.

It is submitted that the transmission power levels for the ABC in this region, should be measured and improved to provide a better standard of reception.

Commercial Radio. The standard of commercial radio being imposed on the rural population is dismal. There is one operator covering both AM and FM – Radio 4GC and HOT FM. The concerns centre on:

- Ownership.
- Lack of local news content.
- Lack of local sporting content.
- Centralization of control.
- Remoteness of control.
- Limited community service.

Ownership. DMG Radio is owned by a foreign body, the Daily Mail Group, which appears to have little regard for the requirements of individuals and businesses in rural Australia. It is submitted that their prime motive (probably not unreasonably) is profit, but in the case of this area, they offer very little evidence of concern for their potential audience and advertisers. Smaller, locally owned and operated radio stations/networks are more suited to rural Australia.

Lack of Local News Content. DMG Radio offers absolutely NO local news content. In fact this city had been deprived of such a basic facility since North Queensland Broadcasting lost control of the company, some seven or eight years ago. A local news facility actually helps to increase the audience, a basic fact that the management seems unable to grasp. Instead they are hell bent on imposing THEIR ideas on the consumers in this area and will not listen to any local requests. The City has a bi-weekly local newspaper as its only source of local news. Radio has more immediacy.

Lack of Local Sporting Content. The same comments that are made in respect of news, generally apply to sporting content. Whilst the drought on local sport content has not been as long as that on news, local sports news was discarded shortly after DMG assumed ownership. This is a district with a very extensive range of sporting events, and an extraordinary participation level, which would make sport newsworthy to a wide range of the population, yet the subject is totally ignored in terms of regular content. Once again, an imposition of the ideas of remote owners and operators, which is intolerable.

Centralization of control. The network is controlled from Western Australia, by a foreign owned company. Says a lot for Australia, does it not? What empathy could rural populations expect from a London based parent company, with no experience in the needs of rural and isolated communities? It also says a lot for the ignorance of governments with regard to the needs of rural and regional communities, that they should allow this situation to arise. While they have concerned themselves with the Packers and Murdochs, the DMGs have been slipping in under their guard, causing havoc in the country.

Remoteness of control. The so called "local" radio station is programmed and operated from Townsville and further afield. An announcer sits in a studio in that city and pretends to be working in Charters Towers! All that remains here is a studio linked by satellite to elsewhere, a staff of two, whose prime task is to gather advertising revenue. The staff have no apparent input into programming.

As an example – my wife and I own a significant retail business and need, from time to time, to promote product. Recently, in response to an approach by the local sales staff of 4GC earlier this year, we bought a package which included a live cross from our business to the announcer who, we were assured, would be in the Charters Towers studio – this in itself would have been a revelation. The announcer did NOT come to Charters Towers (changed his mind at the last minute), conducted the cross from the Townsville studio, had no knowledge of our business, over-rode the local staff member's "live" requirement by recording the cross and generally ruined the operation. He was more concerned about the constraints placed upon him by inflexible programming controlled from somewhere other than Townsville, than about the needs of a paying customer. Needless to say the promotion had no impact, however we did manage to extract some compensation, with the help of the LOCAL employees, who understand our needs. On another occasion we heard an announcer, again pretending to the public to be operating from Charters Towers, issue a temperature advice for Charters Towers, which was actually the temperature in Townsville at the time – totally deceptive and useless information and they are allowed to get away with it. These examples might appear to be minor to the outside observer, however they serve to underline the point that rural Australia is being let down and deceived by the large corporations which are devoid of personality and lack the basic will and desire to know and understand their consumers. You, gentleman, and those of your ilk who have gone before you, have allowed this to happen under your noses. You pay lip service to the importance of rural and regional (now the latest cry of ministers and spokesmen) Australia, yet you have ignored the erosion of our basic entitlements by the multi-national takeover specialists – globalization has reached rural Australia!.

Limited Community Service. Under the present structure, commercial radio is incapable of offering much in the way of community service. A small segment of Community Announcements is programmed, but there is little if anything else. They do not provide any interviews, or public interest segments, choosing rather to impose "John Laws" or, in his place, imbecilic juveniles masquerading as announcers, on us to fill the morning segments. There was a time when, with a locally based announcer, who knew the community, we were treated to interviews with local councillors, police, business and community groups and even our local politicians, so that there was a level of community interest generated by the radio station.

Commercial Advertising. As a retailers, we feel deprived of a suitably effective means of advertising. Radio does have a place in the field of advertising, but for it to be effective, it needs to have a significant audience. In order to gain that audience, the operator must offer attractions, such as interesting segments, local news and sport and a local presence by the older style of professional announcer who was in tune with the community and identified with that community by developing a detailed knowledge of the area, its characteristics and personalities. We are now subjected to the ramblings of the uneducated disk jockey, sitting in a studio 132 km away and probably never having set foot on the western bank of the Burdekin River. The chances of developing an affinity with the local population and thus enhancing the sales potential of advertisers, under the present mode of operation, are nil. There is also collateral damage from a business proprietor's aspect – because of the low standard of radio being delivered, discerning local advertisers will not use the medium, leaving the way open to advertisers from Townsville, thus, potentially, drawing business away from this local area. This statement might seem to contradict the assertion that the audience is low in numbers, and advertising is ineffective, but such advertisers throw money at it and probably have marginal success through repetition. While it might seem that we are “cutting off our noses to spite our faces”, by not advertising, we submit that, unless the quality is present, it is bad business practice simply to advertise without regard to its effectiveness. Perhaps it is time for someone (possibly the ACCC) to undertake a due diligence examination of the control and operation of commercial radio operators in the rural scene.

Employment. The centralized method of operation by DMG has reduced employment in an area where opportunities are already limited. To the best of my knowledge there are only two employees located in Charters Towers. Under previous management there were at least six employees located in the City. With a staff of two, no announcers or technical staff, there are unlikely to be any real career opportunities in this area.

Conclusion. It is concluded that local commercial radio is in a state of decline in this area and faces the real prospect of being closed through diminishing revenue and the centralization policies of the operator. Were it not for the limitations of the transmission envelope allocated in the region and the resultant need for somewhere to house transmission equipment, I feel sure that the operator would have closed the studio by now.

It is submitted that:

- **There is a dire need for a review of government policies in respect of the operation of commercial radio licences in rural Australia, to ensure that community benefit is a prime factor in the issue of licences.**
- **There is a need for a high level of community service obligations to be placed on the proprietors.**
- **Programming content should include minimum standards related to local news and sport and live local content.**
- **Announcers should be located in the areas they are meant to serve, not in the nearest provincial centre.**
- **The control of rural commercial radio in Australia should be investigated to ensure that there is sufficient competition in the industry within defined geographical areas.**

I thank you for the opportunity to make this submission and trust that it will receive due consideration.

E.W. Titley