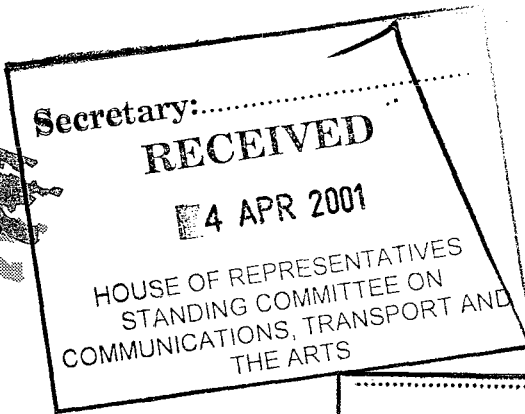




April 2nd, 2001



House of Representatives,
Standing Committee on Communications, Transport and the Arts
Committee Chair,
Mr. Paul Neville, M.P.

Secretary:
Date Received:
Submission No: 289
House of Representatives Standing Committee on Communications, Transport and the Arts

Dear Sir,

Re. adequacy of Radio Services in Non-Metropolitan Australia

We wish to respond to comments made by a witness to the inquiry at the Bathurst hearings on Thursday February 1st, 2001.

The witness, Mr. Richard Mutton gave evidence relating to 2DU's coverage of the Dubbo storm on January 6th, 2001, which we believe contained several inaccuracies.

Before I correct these inaccuracies, I believe it would be appropriate to provide a background of Mr. Mutton's employment with 2DU.

He joined 2DU as morning announcer in February 1989 and remained in that position until January 1999 when he left to pursue a career in state politics. Richard Mutton stood for the state seat of Dubbo for the National Party at the March 1999 election. He won pre-selection following the retirement of long-standing member Gerry Peacocke. Mr. Peacocke held the seat with a 19.4% swing, the safest seat in N.S.W. Following the election, after two weeks and three official counts the seat was won by Mr. Anthony McGrane, an Independent, by 14 votes. As we had already filled the vacancy created by Richard Mutton's departure with our present morning announcer Leo de Kroo, Mr. Mutton was unable to return to 2DU. He had suffered a humiliating defeat at the state election and was effectively out of a job. Just recently Mr. Mutton sought pre-selection for the Upper House in the N.S.W. Parliament in an electorate in another area of the state. He again failed in his attempt to enter the N.S.W. Parliament.

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During his ten years with us Mr. Mutton was privy to a great deal of confidential information and we are disappointed he should decide to air some of that information at a public inquiry.

I would now like to outline exactly what transpired on the weekend of 6th January and 7th January 2001.

Radio 2DU broadcasts with a local announcer in our studio weekdays from 5.30am until midnight, and Saturday and Sundays from 6am until 6pm every week of the year. I know of no other country radio station in this state (and maybe the whole of Australia) which treats localism so importantly and at great expense, so that our local community can be serviced adequately.

On the afternoon of Saturday 6th January, Peter Leslie was the on-duty announcer on air from 12 midday to 6pm. He received a severe thunderstorm advice from the Bureau of Meteorology on our fax machine and broadcast same at 4.35pm, 4.45pm, 5.06pm, 5.19pm 5.31pm and an updated warning at 5.41pm and 5.58pm; a total of seven times before switching over to our network program from 2SM at 6.00pm after the station had been on air locally for 12 hours.

THE 2SM ANNOUNCER BROADCAST THE WARNING AGAIN AT 6.11pm.
THE STORM STRUCK DUBBO AT APPROXIMATELY 6.20PM.
AT 6.24PM THE STORM KNOCKED THE STATION OFF THE AIR.
DURING THE PERIOD WE WERE OFF AIR AND WHILE THE STORM WAS STILL RAGING PETER LESLIE WHO HAD GONE HOME, RETURNED TO THE STUDIOS ALONG WITH ANOTHER 2DU ANNOUNCER AND A FURTHER TWO ANNOUNCERS FROM ZOO FM IN AN ATTEMPT TO GET BOTH STATIONS BACK ON AIR.
THE TWO 2DU ANNOUNCERS ALSO DROVE OUT TO THE TRANSMITTER LOCATED ABOUT TEN MINUTES FROM THE STATION AT THE HEIGHT OF THE STORM TO ASSIST IN GETTING THE STATION BACK ON AIR, THUS PUTTING THEMSELVES IN GREAT DANGER.
OUR TECHNICIAN WAS EVENTUALLY ABLE TO GET OUR STANDBY TRANSMITTER ON AIR AT 7.53PM WHEN THE NETWORK PROGRAM FROM 2SM RETURNED.
WE RESUMED OUR NORMAL WEEKEND LIVE SHIFTS AT 6AM THE FOLLOWING MORNING SUNDAY JANUARY 7TH FOR ANOTHER 12 HOURS OF LOCALISM.

Our Sunday morning announcer Iain Thurlow kept listeners informed with interviews right throughout the morning and into the afternoon. Following is a summary of those interviews he conducted.

SUNDAY 7TH JANUARY 2001

- 7.08AM ADVANCE ENERGY SPOKESPERSON RE: OUTAGES, FALLEN POWER LINES WARNING
- 7.15AM STATE EMERGENCY SERVICES, MACQUARIE DIVISION CONTROLLER MIKE ALBOROUGH RE: UPDATE OF CURRENT SITUATION
- 8.43AM ADVANCE ENERGY SPOKESPERSON – REPEAT OF 7.08 INTERVIEW
- 9.24AM NSW AMBULANCE SERVICE SPOKESPERSON GRAHAM FIELD RE: ASSURING LISTENERS AMBULANCE SERVICE WAS STILL OK
- 9.32AM 2DU NEWS EDITOR PETER SADLER – GENERAL COMMENT
- 10.14AM ADVANCE ENERGY SPOKESPERSON RE: UPDATE OF CURRENT SITUATION WITH OUTAGES
- 10.43AM WEATHERWATCH SPOKESPERSON DON WHITE, INDEPENDENT WEATHER FORECASTER IN SYDNEY DETAILS NATURE OF THE STORM
- 11.20AM DUBBO CITY COUNCIL, MANAGER CIVIL INFRASTRUCTURE STEVE CLAYTON DETAILS COUNCIL'S CLEAN-UP OPERATION
- 11.52AM DUBBO CITY COUNCIL, MAYOR COUNCILLOR ALLAN SMITH OUTLINES CURRENT SITUATION
- 12.36PM STATE EMERGENCY SERVICE MACQUARIE DIVISION SPOKESPERSON LEON WEEKES RE: UPDATE
- 2.48PM NSW MINISTER FOR EMERGENCY SERVICES THE HONOURABLE BOB DEBUS PRESS CONFERENCE HELD IN DUBBO EARLIER IN THE AFTERNOON

I WOULD NOW LIKE TO TURN TO MR. MUTTON'S COMMENTS REGARDING 2DU'S COVERAGE OF THE DUBBO STORM ON 6TH JANUARY 2001. WE HAVE INCLUDED IN OUR SUBMISSION FOUR AIRCHECKS ON CASSETTE WHICH, ALTHOUGH EDITED, QUITE CLEARLY DEMONSTRATE OUR COMPREHENSIVE COVERAGE OF THIS EMERGENCY.

THE FIRST TAPE CONTAINS AN AIRCHECK OF THE STORM WARNINGS BROADCAST ON THE AFTERNOON OF 6TH JANUARY.

THE SECOND TAPE INCLUDES EDITED HIGHLIGHTS OF THE EVENING PROGRAM FROM 2SM IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING THE STORM, AND THE THIRD TAPE COMPRISES HIGHLIGHTS OF OUR LOCAL PROGRAM THE FOLLOWING DAY, SUNDAY 7TH JANUARY. THE FOURTH TAPE IS AN AIRCHECK OF PART OF AN INTERVIEW BETWEEN MR. MUTTON AND LEO DE KROO ON 2DU ON FRIDAY 2ND FEBRUARY, THE DAY AFTER THE BATHURST HEARINGS, RELATING TO MR. MUTTON'S SUBMISSION.

Mr. Mutton claims on the evening of the storm "people were listening to car radios and there was no information coming out". This is false. Callers to the open line program were providing information. Also, at 8.41pm the 2SM announcer broadcast information from Advance Energy re: outages and at 9.28pm a spokesperson from the State Emergency Service, Laura Gooden was interviewed.

It must be remembered that in the first few hours following the storm the S.E.S. was inundated with calls for assistance and a clear picture of the situation was not immediately available. I refer you to the accompanying letter from the Macquarie division of the S.E.S.

Mr. Mutton also claims "2SM in Sydney had been receiving calls all night from listeners in Dubbo wondering what the hell was going on." While it is true 2SM had been receiving calls all night from listeners in Dubbo they were not "wondering what the hell was going on."

NOT ONE CALLER WHO WENT TO AIR THAT NIGHT INDICATED A CONCERN ABOUT A LACK OF INFORMATION COMING OUT OF 2DU.

Mr. Mutton then claims because he believed no information was coming out (of 2DU) he decided off his own bat to provide a report to 2SM. This he did at 10.11pm. However his "report" was littered with inaccuracies and exaggerations.

He claimed about 100 houses and businesses had been unroofed. We have since checked with Dubbo S.E.S. and they confirmed this was the number of houses and businesses which suffered only roof damage, such as the loss of some tiles, and not unroofed.

He also made the totally inaccurate and misleading statement regarding the power outages throughout the city.

He said, "the power in most of Dubbo will probably be on within the next half hour." In fact power did not resume in most areas until the early hours of the following morning and in some areas, not until around Sunday afternoon (07/01/01). Needless to say listeners struggling to cope in the dark with the aftermath of the storm did not appreciate this city councillor doing nothing more than "grandstanding".

The next statement Mr. Mutton made is nothing short of mischievous. He states, "Had anybody else (at 2DU) tried to ring 2SM in Sydney and got hold of them and say, 'Look, we want to go live' I do not think they would have done that because they probably would have been too frightened of the consequences of what might happen to their employment." This statement is misleading and what's more Mr. Mutton with his ten years experience with us, knows it.

The simple truth is that if we felt it was necessary to "go live" we would have done so without even contacting 2SM. We do not need permission to go live during an emergency situation. We just do it. It was wrong and quite mischievous to suggest that a staff member's employment could be in jeopardy if they broke into the network program because of an emergency.

I would like to explain why 2DU did not interrupt the network program and go live on the night of the storm. Firstly, the storm had knocked the station off the air at 6.24pm. We could not do anything until our technician was able to get us back on air. Being January, the General Manager Reg Ferguson and Operations Manager Jon Crosby were on holidays and could not be located at the exact time of the emergency. Mr. Ferguson was eventually located by the technician at approximately 10pm on the evening of the storm and fully briefed on all aspects. He congratulated all staff on their initiative under very trying and difficult circumstances.

The assistant program director, Peter Leslie who was in charge at the time made the decision to go back home and monitor then review the situation if and when we came back on air. When one looks at the severity of the storm we were fortunate we were off air for only 90 minutes, and our technician is to be commended for his work in this regard. When we came back on air at 7.53pm the 2SM network program resumed.

AFTER 8PM THE NETWORK TALKBACK PROGRAM STARTED TO RECEIVE CALLS FROM DUBBO LISTENERS EXPLAINING ABOUT THE STORM AND SHARING THEIR EXPERIENCES. ONE CALLER PROMPTED ANOTHER. THE SITUATION (WITH CALLS) SNOWBALLED AND THE ENTIRE PROGRAM FOR THE FOLLOWING FOUR HOURS WAS TAKEN OVER BY CALLERS RELAYING THEIR EXPERIENCES OF THE STORM. 2DU LISTENERS WERE KEPT INFORMED WITH INFORMATION THAT BECAME AVAILABLE THROUGHOUT THE NIGHT.

Had the 2SM network program ignored the Dubbo storm and just played music then our announcers would have returned to the studio and gone live, however it was deemed unnecessary as 2SM was handling the situation extremely well. In fact over the following days we received several calls complimenting the 2SM announcer who was on duty on the night.

It is also interesting to note in an interview on Friday 2nd February 2001, between Mr. Mutton and our morning announcer Leo De Kroo, (tape included), when asked by Mr. De Kroo about his comments to the inquiry the previous day regarding 2DU's coverage of the storm, Mr. Mutton in fact agreed with Mr. de Kroo that 2DU had done a good job on the night of the storm.

de Kroo: But it was very well covered throughout the evening.

Mutton: It was covered well by an old mate of mine on 2SM in Sydney. We used to work together on 2GF Grafton.

It appears Mr. Mutton also gave the inquiry in Bathurst the impression that the storm warnings which were broadcast on 2DU were more by good luck than good management. This point was mentioned by the Chair during evidence given by Dr. Charles Keys, Deputy Director General NSW State Emergency Service. (CTA 291)

Again this is incorrect. In fact the reverse applies. It is the good management of 2DU which chooses to roster announcers on weekend mornings and afternoons every week that allows storm warnings to be broadcast.

I NOTE DR. KEYS IN HIS EVIDENCE STATED "I HAVE NO COMPLAINT WITH 2DU FOR EXAMPLE IN TERMS OF ITS CARRIAGE OF THE STORM WARNINGS AT THAT TIME" AND "BUT I AM AWARE THAT 2DU CARRIED THE BUREAU'S STORM WARNINGS. I AM NOT MAKING ANY COMPLAINT ABOUT 2DU'S PERFORMANCE IN THAT EVENT."

In summary we believe 2DU provided an excellent coverage of the Dubbo storm; from the storm warnings broadcast throughout the afternoon, the network coverage provided by 2SM in the hours immediately following the storm, and the local coverage the following day.

This was an excellent example of how a regional station during an emergency situation is able to balance the obligation to provide an adequate and comprehensive service and the economic reality of networking.

Again, I emphasise our two stations' commitment to local broadcasting

2DU – 18½ hours per day Monday to Friday 5.30am to Midnight
12 hours per day Saturday and Sunday, 6am to 6pm

ZOO FM 12 hours per day Monday to Friday 6am to 6pm
6 hours Saturday 6am to 12 noon

In comparison, the 3rd commercial radio station in Dubbo, DMG's STAR FM broadcasts only 4 hours local content per day from 6am to 10am, Monday to Friday then takes Network programming for the other 20 hours per day as well as all day and night 24 hours, Saturday and Sunday, from D.M.G.'s Albury hub. This we feel is a very poor commitment to localism.

In conclusion, we quote Richard Mutton in the Daily Liberal 31/01/01. "After the inquiry I would hope that stations are only allowed to network after 6pm weekdays, at a minimum, and at weekends they should be local from 6am to 2pm and then network" he said.

In his submission to the inquiry he states. "What to do: limit networking to 6pm to 6am weekdays and noon to 6am weekends and public holidays"

2DU is doing much more than that now!!!

Yours sincerely
WESTERN BROADCASTERS PTY LIMITED

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Reg Ferguson', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Reg Ferguson
General Manager



State Emergency Service

Macquarie Division



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8 February 2001

Our reference:

Your reference:

MA:SI

Mr Jon Crosby
Operations Manager
Radio 2DU
Carrington Avenue
DUBBO NSW 2830

Dear Jon

For the first few hours after the storm struck Dubbo on Saturday 6th February there was never an intention on my part to pass messages/information to the community via any media.

Unlike flooding when there is invariably time to invite the community, via the media, to be proactive and self-helpful, the storm forced us into a totally reactive response. To advise the public of the storm and its effects would have been to state the painfully obvious and may, in hindsight, have had a negative spin, drawing more sightseers to the disaster area and adding to the difficulties experienced by storm damage crews.

The number of requests for assistance received by State Emergency Service proved to me that the community (those who experienced damage) certainly didn't need any information from us. They were able to access assistance quickly.

From about 9.00pm onwards reports were sent regularly to our public relations unit which then passed on information to the media, including, I understand, the 2SM program.

Before impact there was nothing available to suggest that this particular storm was any more or less severe than others experienced in the past. In the traditional storm season warnings can be an almost daily occurrence and on this occasion I can personally confirm that 2DU broadcast the Bureau of Meteorology warning on regular intervals during the afternoon and early evening.

It is my opinion that Radio 2DU acted quite properly up until forced off air and then responded quickly to restore programming. That networking from 2SM had begun by this time in no way affected our activities.

Had we believed that local broadcasts were necessary then our long-term arrangement with station management to open the station would have been initiated.

To summarise, in the circumstances, access to media during the first few hours of the event was not an issue. From about 9.00pm our media relations unit was kept constantly updated and reports were passed regularly to the media.

If I can be of any further assistance please don't hesitate to call.

Regards

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mike Alborough". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping flourish extending to the right.

Mike Alborough
Division Executive Officer