

SUBMISSION BY

NORTH WEST RADIO PTY LTD

TO

PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY INTO THE ADEQUACY OF

RADIO SERVICES IN NON-METROPOLITAN AUSTRALIA

BACKGROUND

North West Radio Pty Ltd (NWR) is licensee of localised commercial radio services 6KA and 6RED Karratha and 6NW and 6HED Port Hedland. NWR is also licensed to transmit remote commercial services 6SAT and 6FMS to the many other parts of Western Australia not provided with their own commercial radio service. In fact, NWR's mix of AM and FM transmissions with its system of signal 'splits', beams out to almost one geographical third of Australia through 80 satellite reception points and outlets for the benefit of just 130,000 listeners.

It will be appreciated that the cost of equipment, staffing and licence and satellite fees to broadcast NWR's signals is well beyond the usual broadcaster's budget for a balanced investment to audience ratio. Nevertheless, services have been developed and expanded over the years and programming reflects our efforts to meet the expressed needs and preferences of our widespread audiences for local presence to be maintained in their particular area.

SOCIAL BENEFITS

Across remote areas of Western Australia (and in the context of a parliamentary inquiry, even the relatively larger townships of Karratha, Broome, Port Hedland, Newman and Derby should be considered as remote locations), NWR radio services provide audiences with their only means for obtaining regular news affecting their individual community of interest or concern.

There would be few 'social benefits' acceptable to remote audiences if signs of dedication and a social responsibility could not be seen to be met by the provider. In the NWR case, this is attended to by caring about and closely monitoring the localism factor; a concept that may not be easily appreciated by people enjoying the more ordered environment afforded capital city dwellers.

The importance of localism and its associated social implications cannot be better illustrated than in regions like the Northwest that are subject to extreme climatic conditions.

Whilst residents tolerate such vagaries, they rely on their local radio stations for information about cyclone warnings, tidal surges, emergency evacuations and the current road and flood conditions. Other emergency situations arise from time to time and warning and personal bulletins requested by the Western Australian police department are verified and broadcast immediately. These are elements of immense importance to Northwest residents, caravaners and other tourists who depend upon such inclusions in our broadcasts to go about their business, travels and everyday lives.

We further complement information services by providing strictly local sporting results, swap meet locations, fairs, school activities, various coming events, etc. And, for example, we detail changes in the nine-metre Broome tides to cause daily awareness for small boating safety in the region. This is true localism at work. It follows logically that 'social benefits' should also extend to commercialism. Localised advertising on radio to the Northwest marketplace is garnished by NWR with a regional flavour to assist the specialised needs of small local shopkeepers, tradesmen and their customers.

This input gives sharp contrast to the non-specific, blanket coverage of television advertising and the country edition of the Perth's sole newspaper, which is flown in late daily to the state's Northwest. The only other news publication in the area is a community-type paper that is owned by the same Perth company. However, it is compiled and printed in Albany, some 3,000kms away, and is often up to six or more days out of date with its Northwest information.

It is fairly clear that no other media available in the Northwest marketplace is willing or able to provide residents and business with the same local, immediate, mass communication as does radio. Like banking, radio is a service industry, but is much different in deciding priorities for serving its community. The social and economic benefits of NWR's employment policies help to relieve the pervading feeling of isolation that weighs heavily on families of employees in established business throughout regional and remote Western Australia. This is achieved by maintaining studios and offices in Karratha, Port Hedland and Broome and by being able to offer radio sales positions to wives and partners of workers in the vicinity and work experience to local school students.

FUTURE TRENDS

There is no denying that future trends in radio will progressively move towards digital technology. But developments in that direction must be moderated so as not to stifle established regional broadcasters and, with them, localism and its concomitant 'social benefits'. It is a concern to NWR that any future trend that allows metropolitan stations to network their own programming beyond their traditional service areas will increasingly test and likely destroy localism and, eventually, the ideal of diversity in media ownership.

Trends could also threaten the important role that Western Australian regional radio has long played by being a training ground or first port of call, as it were, for graduates from radio school. This company encourages trainees with airfares, temporary accommodation and on-the-job training with "hands-on" experience in on-air presentation and techniques. In addition, these employees often have the chance to expand their developing talents by hosting disco and quiz nights in local hotels and clubs and generally become involved in community life. The reciprocal spin-off is they thus enrich the quality of life for a good many regional and remote residents.

With broader opportunities being offered by metropolitan stations for experienced people, attracting and retaining staff in isolated locations is always a problem, and the training process usually has to be repeated every 12 months or so. Although this is a considerable drain on NWR's resources, it does offer us a form of staffing continuity. More importantly for Australian commercial radio generally, the situation creates a ready pool from which city stations can draw new and experienced staff.

Such a source is not available to the metro's elsewhere in Western Australia and should be seen as a fundamental basic for the future viability of all commercial broadcasting services around Australia, despite future trends.

RADIO NETWORKING

As has already been stated, radio with its immediacy is the only medium throughout most of regional and remote Australia that is able to provide an up-to-the-minute local service to the broad audience. This is fine if a new networked service proposed is one that can meet audience needs by supplying quality, accurate information and news about local events, local sport, weather, community activities, etc. The reality is however that any metropolitan radio service networked into northern regional Western Australia cannot help but produce a quite different and irrelevant programming menu. By the nature of its base it cannot serve two audiences, and will naturally defer to the greater revenue source; that is, metropolitan.

In view of the broad geography but thin demography of our region we anticipate that kind of service would fall far short of listener aspirations for localism and 'social benefit'. Anything less than a dedicated service would seriously diminish community identity and further instil the isolation aspect in residents.

Of pertinence in these matters are our own experiences with regional market forces and narrow profit margins. Clearly, a competitive networked service would seriously threaten viability and either service would certainly fail. If NWR were the one, and programs of another were to be networked into the region, commercial reluctance by management to commit funds to match our existing infrastructure would force dependency back to a bland music and talk format. No 'social benefit' would derive and the end result would leave regional residents without access to a commercial radio service at all.

NEW TECHNOLOGIES

Because of its signal propagation properties, the traditional AM services of regional Western Australia have long been considered an asset by our widely spread small populations.

NWR fully embraced the introduction of section 39 FM licences on the basis of program diversity, albeit that our licenced FM service coverage areas would fall far short of that provided by our AM services. It is our understanding now that experience overseas suggests that in some instances Digital Radio Broadcasting (DRB) provides similarly lesser coverage capability than do the current analog services. We hold great concern that proposed DRB technical specifications for Australia, when finalised, could reflect a similar disparity and many regional listeners around Australia would become disenfranchised when digital radio is introduced.

Accordingly, on the information to hand we do not believe that DRB will offer any perceivable social and community benefits to regional and remote Western Australians, particularly if programming is being networked from a metropolitan station. It can be noted that any wish regional and remote residents might harbour for special interest or non-local broadcasting are already being made available through ABC National services and Internet connection to the World Wide Web. Current intelligence has it that the penetration in regional Western Australia of personal computers with Internet access is rapidly approaching the levels reached by VCR machines in the early 1990s.

CONCLUSION

We suggest that no reason would persuade a typical networking metropolitan broadcaster to continue to transmit 'social benefits' material as detailed above since it would contain irrelevant information likely to alienate their core audience. Rather, and despite all promises to the contrary, our hypothetical broadcaster would be more inclined eventually to placate metropolitan listener demand for relevance so as to meet pressing bottom line exigencies.

NWR would claim that its listeners already receive an adequate, comprehensive and quality programming mix that, all credit to its localised nature via our 80 transmission outlets, specifically meets audience need. Being the best option for commercial 'social benefit', regional radio advertising over NWR fills the niche by being relevant to its target market and by promoting cost effectiveness. We do this more efficiently than any television or networked capital city radio service or newspaper could ever expect or, indeed, would aspire, to achieve.

The importance of localism to community self-image and self-esteem should never be underestimated. Localism generated by regional radio stations is the key to keeping residents advised about extreme and dangerous climatic conditions and informed of all social, political and economic issues that may affect them. Regional radio with its immediacy and reach is the appropriate reliable vehicle for carrying those messages.