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Regional television news: from aggregation to digital broadcasting

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Abstract

This article looks into the history of government policy on the structure of regional television since the policy of aggregation was introduced in the 1980s, with particular emphasis on the evolving spatial patterns in the production and distribution of news content. It draws on the 2002 inquiry by the Australian Broadcasting Authority into the adequacy of news and information programs on regional commercial television to raise some questions about the value and role of local television news; and reassesses the policy of aggregation in the light of ownership and technological changes and in particular the imminence of digital broadcasting in the regions. The current relations between the capital city-based national networks and regional operations will provide the basis for revisiting from a regional perspective the analysis of national networks in Tom O'Regan's 1993 book, *Australian Television Culture*.

Introduction: television news in the regions

Moving from Sydney to Ballina on the north coast of New South Wales in 2000, I noticed a strange difference in the diet of television news. While Richard Morecroft and later Tony Eastley comfortably presented the same ABC evening news program that I was used to, supposedly designed to be NSW specific, the commercial stations were quite inconsistent in their offerings, scheduling, and spatial address. Ten's Sydney-based 5pm news hour is, like the ABC, relayed to the regions as if it were designed for us all, with no specifically regional news. Seven's 6pm half hour is broadcast at 6.30, instead

of *Today Tonight*, while at 6pm there is a half hour of regional news from Prime, the extensive regional network, broadcast from Tamworth. The Nine Network is affiliated with NBN, the former Newcastle station. Instead of the state bulletin from Sydney at 6pm followed by *A Current Affair*, there is an amalgamated news hour presented from Newcastle including stories that are sourced from that city, from around northern NSW, as well as state and national stories from the Nine Network. This is followed by *A Current Affair* at 7pm.

While Sydney-based media do not seem to have problems addressing a place-specific population (not to mention their arrogance in assuming a wider Sydney-centred mindset), the combination of this output and stories from a more diffused space, in various formats, create a confused sense of location, both belonging to and not belonging to the metropolis. The regional space is not specific but conceived as "ours," (and by implication *not* from the cities), as in the Prime slogan "news from the streets of your town." These variations between networks and locations are a result of the history of television networking in Australia, an ongoing process in which news and current affairs programs have been at the sharp end, for they tend to have flagship status for a broadcaster and to lend themselves most easily to spatial identification and cultural and political significance. When they are threatened, as in 2001, when several regional services closed their newsrooms, this is likely to cause opposition and debate.

The process of network consolidation, as economic imperatives have come to overpower local autonomy, is a dominant trope in Australian television scholarship and debate. Tom O'Regan tracked the fate of state-based current affairs programs as the Sydney programs *A Current Affair* and *Hinch* went national in the late 1980s, indicating the rise of a national space as network power consolidated in Sydney (O'Regan, 1993). There was a similar pattern with the ABC's *7.30 Report*, despite vigorous opposition from some states. State-based news programs in prime time are still the norm for all networks except the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS). I aim to expand and update O'Regan's account from a regional perspective, as broadcasters prepare for the transition to digital broadcasting, in order to contribute to a more complex account of Australian television culture.

I want to track the regional news dimension here, with particular emphasis on my own region of Northern NSW, with Lismore the local centre. The uneven, troubled, and compromised accommodation of regional news (any regional current affairs long predates my experience) has a different history from that documented by O'Regan, not in the relations between stations in more or less large metropolitan markets, but in a previous design of the television landscape, in which regional stations were the sole operator (in "solus markets"), whereas since the 1960s there have been three competitors in the cities. My focus is on commercial television, although there is another story to

tell about the ABC's now largely abandoned television studios in places like Rockhampton and Townsville.

In August 2002 the Australian Broadcasting Authority released the report of its inquiry into the adequacy of regional television news, recommending that regional broadcasters be required to provide a minimal amount of local news and/or information, and proposing a points system of two points per minute of local news and one point per minute of local current affairs or information (ABA, 2002 p.11). This inquiry was sparked by the progressive closure of regional news services and has fortuitously provided me with statements of the arguments and passions the issue has engendered. I draw on the report, the submissions and a tape of the public meeting held by the ABA in February 2002 in Canberra, a particularly rich site for this investigation. In addition, I had previously interviewed Lismore-based sales managers for our Media Map exercise at Southern Cross University (<http://hmcs.scu.edu.au>). I begin with some history.

Aggregation

Aggregation was a strategy of the Hawke government to implement the policy of equalisation, which some saw as a euphemism for US-style networking, involving the ability to transmit simultaneously the same signal to all viewers across the country. It was introduced in the late 1980s under pressure from the powerful television owners wanting to expand their markets. The plan was to discontinue the licensing of single stations in regional centres (solus markets), mainly along the East Coast, and to combine the markets of several so that they would be forced to make considerable investments in expanded infrastructure and ensure a distinct program supply. The aims of equalisation were that:

- (a) persons living in regional areas of Australia have access, as soon as practicable, to three commercial television services; and
- (b) commercial television stations in regional areas of Australia:
 - (i) serve larger and more commercially viable markets; and
 - (ii) provide television services on a competitive basis (Ministerial statement, May 20, 1986, cited in FACTS, 2002 p.14).

Regional stations could previously "cherry pick" programs from the three city-based networks, thus having a powerful influence on program prices. The metropolitan stations were in the process of establishing network relations for program buying, but did not yet operate as national networks of simultaneous transmission. The policy of equalisation was controversial, as it involved the government supporting the interests of the existing networks and going over the heads of the then Australian Broadcasting Tribunal's recommendations for a restructure of the industry, in light of satellite delivery, to allow for new players. It was a Senate Select Committee chaired by Packer mate Graham

Richardson that came up with the government's plan of an aggregated market (or service area) in Queensland, Northern NSW, Southern NSW, and Victoria (Senate Select Committee, 1987). The rest of non-metropolitan Australia was to be covered by a separate regime for satellite-delivered television, the Remote Commercial Television Service (RCTS) licences. In the case of Queensland, the RCTS service area was later to be combined with the aggregated market of coastal towns. Tasmania remains a distinct regional market with two commercial services.

This was presented as a policy of expanding choice for viewers and giving country viewers the same options as city viewers, as each station in the newly defined aggregated markets was forced to become an affiliate of a metropolitan network (a commonly owned group of stations in each of the mainland capital cities) in order to ensure a programming source. The combined regional population was about one third of the nation, but was responsible for only 20% of advertising revenue (Department of Communications, 1985), so this move represented a significant increase in the metropolitan networks' reach and the potential to create greater revenue.

The network affiliation relationship means that the network provides their program signal and in return is paid a proportion of the regional station's advertising revenue. However, with even less power than the smaller city stations, the regional stations have no control over network programming decisions such as Seven's loss of the rights to broadcast AFL to Ten in 2001, despite the protestations of some of its affiliates that the network should have been prepared to make a higher bid. Furthermore, the network fee includes revenue gained from local programs, and this functions as a disincentive to the production of such programs, particularly those that are not high rating. Despite their opposed interests in regard to such negotiations, both metropolitan and regional television companies are represented by the industry body the Federation of Australian Commercial Television Stations (FACTS).

There was resistance to aggregation from the larger and wealthier regional stations (such as Canberra and Newcastle) for it would involve expensive technical expansion for little gain in audience reach and they could see competition for their revenue streams. On the other hand some regional operators, notably the group to become the Prime network, restricted by the two station ownership rule and not operating in any large market, could see regional expansion as a growth strategy and have joined together to become larger companies.

Aggregation was also a major change in the spatial organisation of control. Now the owners vary in the size of their reach, and decisions may be made at different points in the organisation (at head office, branch office, or local station, more accurately perhaps transmission centre or sales office). This layered structure means that it is no longer accurate to speak of television stations, but rather services. Castells' term "network enterprise" seems appropriate for such

dispersed companies, as distinct from the television networks that determine programming and are headquartered in Sydney. The companies that own the licences in these aggregated markets have expanded to the extent that the originally designated aggregated markets have become effectively redundant in most cases, although, following licence requirements, they remain distinct legal entities.

Aggregation meant a fundamental change in the economics of regional television. The stations were obliged to make large investments in the technical infrastructure for expanding the transmission area (\$13 million for the Lismore station RTN 8), resulting in significant staff reductions and less local production. Each aggregated market contains about a million people, but the operation is more technologically demanding and expensive than a comparably sized city. The process was heavily subsidised through licence fee rebates and other concessions, but now operates fully competitively (FACTS, 2002, p.8).

A distinctive characteristic of regional television is the division of each aggregated market into windows or submarkets roughly corresponding to the former stations' service areas (though they are not identical for all networks). There are in fact 88 regional television advertising markets and submarkets (FACTS, 2002, p.7), in contrast to a single market for each metropolitan station. Regional broadcasters have needed to develop this system in order to maximise local advertising, for the expected increase in national advertising has not occurred. The signal can be switched from a national one to a local window to enable the insertion of local content specific to each. This targeting of distinct submarkets is achieved through a series of microwave bearer "splits."

For example NBN's coverage area in the Northern NSW aggregated market consists of six windows (Gold Coast, Far North Coast, Mid North Coast, Newcastle Hunter, North West and Central Coast) stretching from the northern reaches of the Sydney market to the Gold Coast, the southern reaches of Brisbane broadcasters. The extreme north and south windows thus compete with signals from Brisbane and Sydney respectively. The Gold Coast is particularly well served, for Channel Nine in Brisbane also produces a Gold Coast news program, followed by the Brisbane news. Each of the local windows can be programmed with distinctive news and advertising inserts, although it is also possible to substitute entire programs in a window. For example Prime in 2001 showed AFL live on its Gold Coast window, but not on the Lismore one.

Though it clearly increases the revenue to metropolitan networks through program costs, which are claimed to be rising steeply (Prime, 2002, p.5), aggregation has arguably not delivered any financial benefits to the regions. Revenue from regional television, serving 35% of Australians, was 22% of national advertising revenue and less than 20% of all television revenue in 1999-2000 according to the ABA (cited in FACTS, 2002, p.7), about the same proportion as before aggregation. This is contrary to the desired aims of aggregation,

because of the costs of reaching all corners of the market and the complexities of operating separate windows. Also, having established the necessary infrastructure and found a way of operating economically, the sector now faces similar challenges again in the imperative to convert to digital.

The local offices of the regional television companies are now basically sales offices, selling time to clients and often making the commercials as well. Regional television advertising has in fact become relentlessly local. In Ballina we see prime time ads for the local RSL club, restaurants in Byron Bay and carpet shops in Lismore, not to mention my own institution, Southern Cross University. These are locally made without high production values and rerun remorselessly, at low rates, reminiscent of late night spots on Sydney television. The rates are as low as almost anywhere in the world (FACTS, 2002, p.7). They contrast startlingly with high budget ads for national and global advertisers like Coke and McDonald's. Although these tendencies need to be quantified, local advertising clearly constitutes a lower proportion of television advertising in the major cities. Prime's submission to the ABA asserts that the access to television advertising "is vital to local businesses and assists in maintaining strong regional and rural communities" (Prime, 2002, p.6), but does not provide evidence of such benefits.

Regional audiences did accept the expansion of their viewing choice, at least initially. According to an Australian Broadcasting Tribunal survey of the Southern NSW aggregated market in 1990, in the early days of aggregation, half saw a better quality of service and half of those then receiving three commercial services found the information on their local area was better than a year previously. However the expanded services continued to be perceived as basically servicing their original solus market, so Capital was identified with Canberra and WIN with Wollongong. Prime, the third service, was identified with a more indeterminate western NSW region. The news services in particular were closely identified with the city of origin. Six out of 10 people claimed to use television as the main source of news on their local area, whereas 85% felt the provision of a local news service was important (Australian Broadcasting Tribunal, 1990). Other official inquiries have heard similar testimony about the value of local news services, but FACTS maintains in its submission to the ABA that audience research by the broadcasters does not bear out this "voiced support" (FACTS, 2002, p.11). When Prime in Canberra replaced its local news bulletin with a networked current affairs program, ratings rose 43% (FACTS, 2002, p.11). Such evidence is crucial support for broadcasters' cancellation decisions.

Major players

A side issue in the present context is the issue of media ownership, which

continues to be politically contentious as Federal Parliament debates a bill to deregulate foreign and cross-media ownership. However there is another aspect of the ownership regime not addressed by this bill and fundamental to any consideration of regional television, and that is the audience reach cap. According to the Broadcasting Services Act proprietors may only own stations with a combined audience reach of 75% of the national population. This rule had its origins in the changes introduced by the Hawke government, when there was some pressure to break up the media monopolies already holding extensive press and radio interests, as well as forming powerful television networks around ownership of stations in Sydney and Melbourne. The initial level of 60% did not allow companies to own stations in all the capital cities and the limit was later raised to 75%.

This means that most regional stations are owned by different organisations from the metropolitan stations, though this clearly achieves little in terms of containing network power, for regional operators are heavily dependent on metropolitan networks for almost all programming. Furthermore it creates a level of organisational structure and management which is arguably inefficient from the networks' point of view. The policy justification for such separate structures must be in their degree of programming autonomy, precisely what is at stake in the current ABA inquiry. If such autonomy cannot be protected, then the audience cap serves no purpose. Without it commercial television could become truly national in the orientation of its content, including news, and the sources of its advertising; and the intermediate level of regional ownership could be dispensed with, so long as there was a requirement for the networks to serve all Australians.

Although Australian regional commercial television was born local in the 1960s, in 2002, contrary to the Government's expectations in introducing aggregation, ownership of regional and remote television is almost as concentrated as that of metropolitan television. Table 1 lists the major players in the various categories of aggregated, regional, and remote markets.

There is a clear pattern of major players (companies grown from former regional broadcasters Prime and WIN and more recently the expanding company with diverse media interests, Southern Cross Broadcasting), with little room to move. The Seven metropolitan network's ownership of one of the Queensland regional services (combined with the former RCTS licence) and NBN in Northern NSW are the exceptions. NBN is the only television company to exist in just the form that the policy of aggregation might have predicted: formerly a local station in the solus Newcastle market, it expanded its service area to encompass what had been the area of five stations (in Taree, Tamworth, Coffs Harbour, and Lismore). WIN Television, based in Wollongong, has expanded to become the major Nine affiliate in regional markets, putting it in a strong position to take over NBN.

MARKET	OPERATORS		
Queensland	WIN	Southern Cross	Seven
Northern NSW	NBN	Southern Cross	Prime
Southern NSW	WIN	Southern Cross	Prime
Victoria	WIN	Southern Cross	Prime
Western Australia			Prime
Central/South Australia	Imparja	Southern Cross	
Tasmania	WIN	Southern Cross	

Table 1: Ownership of regional and remote television services

Prime Television is a large regional television operation covering all the aggregated markets in NSW, Victoria, and Western Australia. The company was established by Paul Ramsey in the pre-aggregation stations in Tamworth and Taree in NSW and has expanded and merged with Paul Bendat's Golden West Network, the RCTS satellite service in WA. The network enterprise is very dispersed and has different functional centres, for there is a separate designated company in each of the aggregated markets, as required by licence conditions. The Lismore operation is a branch office of Prime Television (Northern), headquartered in Tamworth. This means that administration and some of the production of commercials and editing of news stories are done in Tamworth and it is also the transmission centre. Although sales manager Bill Graham wants viewers to think that "everything on Prime comes from Magellan St" (where its Lismore office is located), the reality is that the local news content and commercials are put together and broadcast from Tamworth and everything else comes from Seven in Sydney, though the location in Tamworth is never made explicit.

Channel Ten in Northern NSW is the television station with the deepest history and roots in the region, for it was the original station in the Northern Rivers solus market before aggregation. RTN 8 (Richmond Tweed Television) first broadcast in 1962 and with its sister station NRN 11 Coffs Harbour, was owned by Northern Star Holdings, owner of the *Northern Star* newspaper and the radio station 2LM, in one of the most concentrated media markets in the country. Before aggregation it broadcast local programs including news and chat shows. Shortly after aggregation the company was placed in receivership and it discontinued its local news program (FACTS, 2002, p.10).

The company effectively ceased to exist following the extensive takeovers spurred by the new legislation. Most recently, in 2001, the operating company

Telecasters Australia was taken over by Southern Cross Broadcasting, a rising media conglomerate with interests in affiliates of all three metropolitan networks. Because of its extensive reach, including a vast area of Central Australia served by the satellite service Seven Central, the company now covers, in the words of sales manager Warren Elliott, "everything east of the WA border." Under the previous owner the local operation identified itself explicitly with its network supplier, Ten, unlike the other regional broadcasters, but it now identifies itself as Ten Southern Cross.

Southern Cross Broadcasting owns metropolitan radio interests and considerable digital capacity, so is positioning itself for a multi-platform future, with its digital link along the entire east coast, positioning the company in competition with Telstra. Ironically the technologies of convergence are rendering the current cross-ownership controls problematic, for Elliott predicts an imperative for different media forms to work together, perhaps with print journalists also carrying digital video cameras to produce television stories written up more fully in the *Northern Star*. Southern Cross Broadcasting plans to establish a digital production studio in Canberra, for centrality and political advantage. Prime is doing the same. Elliott sees a pattern of fewer people, further away, making decisions.

News and the ABA inquiry

The nature of its news service traditionally goes to the heart of a television broadcaster's relationship with its community. The companies under examination here have adopted different strategies, from complex operations through a chain of reporters and camera operators sending footage through transmission lines for various modes of assembly in network hubs, to opting out entirely of providing local news. In Northern NSW, Southern Cross Broadcasting has continued to observe the latter strategy, while NBN and Prime maintain variously targeted news programs.

Ten Lismore has not carried local news programs for eight years. Elliott sees this in rationalist terms: the news costs too much and audiences are not interested enough. This does not mean, however, that the Lismore operation lacks a local profile or an ethic of community support and regional economic development. In fact, it is a prominent sponsor of cultural activities such as NORPA (the local theatre company), the Byron Bay Writers Festival, the BASC film festival, the Open Slather youth film competition, and the Thursday Plantation Sculpture Show. This makes for an interesting tension between the station as locally rooted and committed to regional economic and cultural development, yet being an affiliate of a network operating efficiently and rationally by targeting a young audience with few local productions.

Newcastle remains the head office of NBN, where it provides the highest rating news program. NBN has maintained a commitment to local news and

runs a relatively expensive news operation in Lismore, producing an average of eight stories a day, sent to Newcastle for compilation. The bulletins for each of the windows are produced in Newcastle on the basis of 10.5 minutes of local news scattered throughout the hour. Prime, on the other hand, broadcasts two news bulletins: Prime Coastal, covering Port Macquarie to the Gold Coast, and Prime Inland, covering Tamworth, Armidale, Taree, and Moree (FACTS, 2002, p.18), but both of these are very large and diffuse areas. Prime has half the news staff in Lismore that NBN has, but is continuing to put up competition for NBN, though both are relative newcomers compared to Ten.

The ABA initiated its inquiry into the Adequacy of Local News and Information Programs on Commercial Television Services in Regional and Rural Australia in December 2001, following the announcement that Southern Cross Broadcasting's local news programs in Canberra, Cairns, Townsville, Darwin, and Alice Springs would cease in November that year, and the earlier cutting of local services by Prime in Canberra, Newcastle, and Wollongong. Responses to these developments had underlined the lack of regulatory protection for what many regard as the public space of television news, and many realised that the remaining programs might not continue in a context of major expenditure for digital conversion. The ABA called for submissions and announced a series of public meetings in the affected cities. The inquiry was to look into:

- i. The adequacy of the contribution by commercial television broadcasting licensees in regional and rural Australia to coverage of matters of local significance; and
- ii. Community concerns about whether coverage of local news and information by commercial television services is responsive to audience needs in regional and rural Australia; and the adequacy of the current regulatory framework to meet the objects of the Act.

Submissions from broadcasters defended their strategies. FACTS argues in its submission that aggregation was recognised not to involve "close communities of interest" (FACTS, 2002, p.9) and therefore news services would not be expected in every local window. From an economic point of view, it continues, only an exceptionally high rating local news service in a submarket will be viable. Although there have been three in many submarkets in the early days of aggregation, no more than two have survived anywhere (FACTS, 2002, p.9). Even in small metropolitan markets the lowest rating news service is not profitable, it claims. FACTS's lengthy submission argues that there is no case of market failure; regional viewers are better off than prior to aggregation, for there are more local news services employing more journalists; regional viewers have increased access to metropolitan news services; many markets which had no local service pre-aggregation now have one; and there is no need for regulatory intervention. Commercial stations contribute heavily in other ways

to the health of local communities, such as through announcements, fundraising, sponsorship, and advertising. Southern Cross Broadcasting likewise argues that competing local services duplicate up to 85% of their content and the audience is in fact better served by offering entertainment programs at this time, usually in their case *The Simpsons*. It argues that the company maintains a commitment to localism by, for example, its community service announcements, weather reports, and emergency information in case of fires, floods, and cyclones. This is well illustrated in the case of Ten Lismore.

Prime Television argues that it is simply not viable for all three operators in a market to provide local programming, and there is a general trend for the incumbent in a sub-market to remain the dominant service. It tells of its own experience, having acquired the licences for Tamworth/Taree, Orange/Dubbo/Wagga, and Albury shortly before aggregation, where each station was the sole operator and had run its own news service for almost 20 years.

Without the benefit of market research, Prime (and its competitors) incorrectly assumed that local news was the dominant factor behind that viewer loyalty. As a result, most aggregated licensees introduced local news services, scheduled head to head against the incumbent's local news service (Prime, 2002, p.6).

However the "incumbent's advantage" continued.

In the markets of Newcastle, Wollongong and Canberra, the incumbent's news service consistently out-rated Prime's local news service, at times by more than 10 ratings points, the notable exception being the period of the Sydney 2000 Olympics (Prime, 2002, p.6).

Accordingly, it decided to shut down news operations on the oversupplied Gold Coast and in Newcastle, Canberra, and Wollongong, large population centres where Prime could not compete with NBN or the ABC. It still supplies news in its incumbent markets, which, by extension, include Northern NSW.

WIN Television argues that remote and rural communities are better served with localism than they were pre-aggregation. It claims to devote considerable resources (244 staff) to producing local news, and repeats a claim that it produces more individual news stories per week than any other broadcaster in Australia (WIN, 2002, p.3). However, despite its own stated commitment, including being the last remaining commercial news service in Canberra, the company would not like to see local news required, for "it is possible that an absolute minimum effort would be made by some stations merely to meet the legal requirement and the result would be of no real benefit to any community, and therefore a pointless effort" (WIN, 2002, p.2). There is some truth in this characterisation in regard to the present situation.

Against the industry defences an array of individuals and organisations, particularly from Canberra and North Queensland, have come forward to argue that regional broadcasters should be obliged to provide news programs specif-

ic to the communities they serve. These include local politicians and community leaders, sports and other community groups, organisations with media expertise, individuals with media experience, and concerned members of the public. It is clear from their in many cases impassioned arguments that they see great symbolic significance in the existence of local news programs. This particularly affects Canberra residents, who see the sudden diminution of their services as indicating a lessening of the city's facilities and therefore its status on the national and international scene. They point to a need for Canberra to be properly serviced as a residential community, with adequate news of disasters such as the Christmas 2001 bushfires. One submitter said:

Watching Prime, Ten Capital or SBS News in Canberra, one can hear of storms devastating Sydney or an ex-Victorian premier talking about soccer leagues but not know, for example, that in the past week the centre of the city was closed due to a major gas leak for several hours, what actions Canberra's Legislative Assembly is taking (and yet Canberra is represented at all State/Territory meetings – surely Brisbane, Adelaide, Darwin, Perth, Hobart, Sydney and Melbourne have regional news services), or that the Canadian government had made a major contribution to mark the Centenary of Federation in the form of an artwork to be located in the parliamentary zone...(Verhoeven, 2002).

The complaint is not that these items were not reported, but they were not reported on commercial television. This is a pattern in many of the submissions from high news consumers, which the industry would answer by reference to ratings and the existence of the ABC and other local media. It is a case of "voiced concern" not being supported by audience research.

One of the major media unions questions the basis of the ownership regime which separates metropolitan from regional interests by virtue of the audience cap:

...Ten Network programming is being broadcast in unadulterated format throughout all of NSW and Queensland with the only difference being locally produced commercials and one hour of local basketball coverage in North Queensland that has no guaranteed future.

If the cap is designed to provide diversity in programming and ensure responsiveness to local needs, it is failing. (Community and Public Sector Union, 2002, p.15).

Another issue the CPSU raises is the existence of a local archive. One Townsville employee is quoted:

Furthermore the archival footage that has been recorded over the 39 years that Ten Local News (in all its various guises) has been broadcasting is priceless. What about future events? What about history? (Community and Public Sector Union, 2002, p.8).

Such issues are among the many that the regulator faced. The ABA was convinced by the many voices from the regions protesting about the reduction in local services and the prospect of the trend continuing. It recommended a new licence condition which would:

Require each licensee in the aggregated markets to broadcast matters of local significance in each of the sub-markets, meeting a minimum of 90 points per week and 960 points per sub-market per eight weeks (ABA, 2002 p.11).

The report mentions "pre-aggregation service areas" many times, indicating that it too had come to the conclusion that aggregation was a failure, at least in terms of localism.

Despite the appearance of public spiritedness in many of the submissions, on closer examination it emerges that they come from people or organisations with a vested interest in the existence of as many news outlets as possible. They are in many cases media workers, unions, or former workers, concerned about industry structures and job opportunities. Or they are *newsmakers* rather than consumers. They may hold public office or run sports clubs or the like, and for them publicity is the lifeblood. They are protesting about their reduced opportunities for exposure and therefore the reduced likelihood that they will receive public support, funding, or sponsorship. These are genuine grievances that should be addressed, but they cannot necessarily be taken as a justification for loss-making programming.

Conclusion: the question of value

Debates about local news on regional television must be seen in the context of federal policy initiatives, from the introduction of aggregation, with mixed and in some cases unexpected results, to another expensive proposition, the conversion to digital transmission. The economics of regional television is fragile, with its subordinate status in the ownership regime and thus in power over programming, and its elaborate mechanisms for truly local advertising. Aggregation has not delivered the economic benefits foreseen, though the industry argues that there are more news and information services and jobs than there were before the policy was introduced.

Further examination of the history of particular regional commercial television services and, in particular, their news services, may reveal to what extent and why audiences value content from and about their locality or region. The operators making submissions to the ABA's present inquiry argue that they are serving their communities best by allowing the incumbent only to maintain its position as provider of local news. Many others protest loudly at this neglectful behaviour. Objections raised at the Canberra meeting in particular displayed an active citizenry of would-be newsmakers for whom media exposure is crucial to their political or financial prospects, and arguably also of benefit to the

greater interests of the community. The most articulate statements of the need for diverse local news come from people with declared commitments to the ABC or in the "time poor" category not likely to be large consumers of local (or perhaps any) commercial news.

My observations of Prime and NBN's news in Northern NSW do not justify applying any notion of quality. The services are minimal, and their few journalists are generally inexperienced, though they may be gaining valuable training. The stories are gathered from a wide area with little supervision and tend to report events that would have been triggered by a press release or perhaps police report, so little initiative or investigative skill is evident. The items are often "good news" stories of official announcements, festivals, and sports events. Regional news programs function more as a noticeboard than as a critical examination of events, but neither do they have a place-specific community focus. It is not surprising that those services without a deep history in a locality do not have a loyal audience there.

In my own context we are served by North Coast segments in two local commercial services, two commonly owned commercial radio stations owned by Sydney's 2SM, a local ABC radio station, a regional newspaper, the *Northern Star*, owned by Tony O'Reilly's Australian Provincial Newspapers, a raft of independent newspapers (most notably the *Byron Shire Echo* and the *Northern Rivers Echo*), a number of community radio stations, and the only regional community television station, LINC TV. In my workplace, conversations are sparked frequently by local press or radio items, but I don't recall any based on a regional commercial television news story. And media students often write an appreciative essay on the *Byron Shire Echo*, a passionate defence of community broadcasting, or a critical analysis of a *Northern Star* story on reconciliation or drug laws. However, they're more likely to write about Triple J than the local ABC station and about *60 Minutes* than local television news. It's not that they wouldn't defend the need for local media and many of them have a fierce pride in the region, but, as the regional operators have found out, in principle support does not translate into personal value or deliver actual audiences. Shots of car accidents, rescued wildlife and school sports carnivals amongst the stories from Canberra, Sydney, and Washington may just contribute as much as the sequence of genres to an experience of televisual flow, between places more or less familiar.

If audiences don't value these programs as much as newsmakers and media workers do, then it is not surprising that broadcasters don't want to make them, especially when they are being required to fund another major technical reinvention. At issue in the present inquiry is the lack of a clear mechanism to require any local news programs in regional markets (as there is no requirement for a newspaper). The ABA's proposal applies to a wider range of local programming than just news in each window. Let's hope the broadcasters can

find real local talent, themes and audiences. But they'd need to be allowed to forget ratings.

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