

1998

Aggregation and regional television

Neryl East
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AGGREGATION AND REGIONAL TELEVISION

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the
requirements for the award of the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

from

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by

NERYL EAST, MA

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My thanks also to the many staff currently working in television newsrooms around Australia who provided me with invaluable background information.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the implementation into regional Australian television of the policy known as equalisation. It places the implementation of the policy in context with significant developments since the introduction of regional television in Australia, and analyses how by 1997 the aggregation of services had affected individual television markets in four states. It also considers the effect of aggregation on the practice of journalism in regional television newsrooms.

The thesis documents the steps that led to equalisation including the debate over the proposed satellite distribution of television services across Australia, the formulation of a draft plan for the equalisation of services, and various government studies and reports. It also examines how aggregation changed the operations of regional television newsrooms and their staff through the following factors:

- Major structural changes to the industry including the establishment and closure of stations and/or newsrooms
- The onset of competition in aggregated markets
- Changes in the importance of “localism” on television
- The impact of cost-cutting and reduced resources
- The regional stations’ increased reliance on their metropolitan affiliates.

It also contains a case study of the development of one regional television news service: WIN Television’s service in western New South Wales.

The thesis shows that while there are differing schools of thought on the benefits of aggregation, the equalisation policy forever changed “local” television, and created a new environment for those who chose the regional television industry as their career. While the policy led to new opportunities in the form of additional news services in some regions and a wider program choice for viewers, it resulted in a general trend away from coverage of parochial issues and a decline in the quality of news stories because of stretched resources. The viewing audience might have been the main beneficiary of aggregation, but it could be argued that the loser was quality regional television programming in general and news in particular.

ABBREVIATIONS

AAP

Australian Associated Press

AAT

Administrative Appeals Tribunal

ABA

Australian Broadcasting Authority

ABCB

Australian Broadcasting Control Board

ABT

Australian Broadcasting Tribunal

ACCC

Australian Competition and Consumer Commission

BTCE

Bureau of Transport and Communications Economics

DOC

Department of Communications

DOCA

Department of Communications and the Arts

DOTC

Department of Transport and Communications

FDU

Forward Development Unit (within Department of Communications)

MCS

Multi Channel Services

NH

Newcastle Herald

RTA

Regional Television Australia

SMH

Sydney Morning Herald

GLOSSARY

AAP: Australian Associated Press

News agency providing ongoing information to media outlets.

affiliate

Television station which, although not having formal ties through ownership, showed similar programming content.

metropolitan affiliate: metropolitan station from which a regional aggregated station took its programming

regional affiliate: the station in an aggregated area which showed a particular metropolitan network's programming

aggregation

Part of the policy of equalisation, allowing for regional television markets to be expanded to include additional commercial licensees in competition with the incumbent

angle

The spin put on a story by a journalist to make it particularly newsworthy

Approved Market

An area in which regional stations were to be aggregated, and to begin broadcasting in competition with each other

Betacam

A broadcast quality video recording format

Betacart

A specialised machine from which television news stories can be played for broadcast on air.

break

A segment in a news bulletin between commercials.

first break: the segment from the headlines to the first commercial break

cherry-picking

The practice before equalisation in which regional television stations took their choice of programs from the three metropolitan networks.

chroma-key

A television device for matting one image over another, for example to give the impression that a weather presenter is standing in front of a map or a moving scene

co-ordinators

Staff in television stations whose role is to ensure a smooth on-air transition between programs, and between program content and commercial breaks.

colour story

A story in a news bulletin which is not of particularly strong news value, but is of human interest or has particularly strong visual elements to merit its inclusion.

down-link (see up-link)

Material coming from a secondary transmission point back to the original source

edit suite

An area where news stories are edited together, blending the pictures, natural sound and voice-over to produce a story read to go to air.

effects

The natural sound recorded with pictures, eg traffic noises under pictures of a highway.

equalisation/equalization

The policy which sought to provide the same choice of television channels for regional viewers as their city counterparts.

exclusive (also scoop)

A news story which is not covered by rival news organisations

feed

Electronic transfer of material between a sender and a receiving point

flash-frames

A brief glimpse of another shot, left in in error when a news story is edited.

generic

Used to describe news stories or other programs shown across an entire Approved Market, rather than a specific item created purely for one viewing area

graphic

Still, visual material used in stories, such as a page containing football scores. Also, the picture shown beside the newsreader's head as they read the introductions during a news bulletin

incumbent

A station in an aggregated market which originally held the monopoly licence in that market

integrated

Describes a news bulletin where local stories are combined with national and international stories, as opposed to a service which has a separate local bulletin, followed by the national news

landline

Using telecommunication cables to transfer material between two points

leader

The material at the start of a tape which is not intended to be shown on air, usually containing the station and program name, the on-air date and a taped countdown

link

Electronic path for the transfer of material, also used as verb, to send material electronically (microwave link, satellite link, fibre optic link specifies type of path)

live cross

A situation in a news bulletin or other program where material is shown live to air from outside the originating studio

live outside broadcast

An entire program shown live to air away from the studio, using portable equipment, for example a football grand final

live voice over (LVO) (also reader voice over)

An item in a news bulletin where the pictures are pre-recorded and played on air from a tape machine, but the voice-over is read live to air by the presenter

multi-channel services (MCS)

An alternative to aggregation, where stations would have retained their monopolies in regional areas and been granted additional licences in those areas

newsbreak (also update)

A "mini" news bulletin containing highlights of a day's events

opener

The pictures and sound shown on air at the start of a news bulletin

package

A self-contained television news story, with pictures, effects and voice-over mixed together on one tape

playoff

The pictures and sound shown at the end of a break in a news bulletin, before a commercial break

plug

The words spoken at the end of a break, such as “coming up after the break, the latest weather. . .”

pool

A situation where two or more stations share news footage, hence “pool feed”, “pool shoot”

pre-recorded

A news bulletin or other program which is not live to air, but is taped some time beforehand

re-packaged

A news story which has been changed in some way, with new pictures edited in, a different voice-over added, or material cut out

read (noun)

An item in a news bulletin which is read live to air by the newsreader, with no videotape pictures accompanying it

reader voice over (RVO)

See live voice over

relay

A physical point facilitating the transfer of material

microwave relay: using microwave means to transfer material

rundown

A list of all the elements contained in a news bulletin, including the headline pictures, order of stories, plugs, playoffs, commercial breaks etc

scoop

See exclusive

solus

Literally “alone, unaccompanied”, used to describe stations in non-aggregated areas which still operate as monopoly licensees

standup

A section in a television news story where the journalist presents directly to the camera

stringer

A freelance camera crew

studio set

The area where the presenters sit during a television news bulletin

super

The computer-generated wording which appears on screen during a news bulletin, usually over an interview to give the name and title of the person on screen

supplementary licences

Additional licences which would have been granted to monopoly licensees under one option considered in the lead-up to aggregation

switch (verb)

What co-ordinators do between programs and commercial breaks, and between local and metropolitan affiliate programs

terrestrial distribution

Means of distributing videotape material between stations, such as courier, mail, personal delivery

throw

What a presenter does when they introduce another presenter or an element of a news bulletin, such as "now it's over to Geoff with sport". Also used as a noun in the same context, such as "the throw to sport"

traffic

The section of a television station which schedules commercial breaks and other items into the programming content

translator

Secondary transmission site, receiving a television broadcast from a transmitter and re-broadcasting it to a specific area

turned around

The term used when a program is recorded off another station, usually a metropolitan affiliate, and shown on air a short time afterwards, for example, *A Current Affair* is recorded off Channel 9 at 6.30pm and replayed on air on WIN at 7pm

U-matic

A videotape recording format now largely outmoded by Betacam

up-link

Transmission of material from an originating source to a secondary transmission point, for example, sending material from a ground-based camera to a helicopter

update

See newsbreak

viewing area

A region within an Approved Market in which viewers access the same programs and commercials

vox pops (vox populi)

“The people's voice”, segments within news stories where brief comments are shown from ordinary people in the street

window

A segment in a news bulletin or other program which can be replaced by alternative material for specific viewing areas

wrap

A television news story made up of more than one item

REGIONAL AUSTRALIAN TELEVISION AGGREGATION
IN CHRONOLOGY

1956: Television first broadcast in Australia.

1961-3: Commercial television introduced in regional areas.

1979: Government announced intention to establish a domestic satellite communications system.

1983: New Labor government decided to proceed with supplementary television licence system in regional areas, in line with its policy of equalisation.

1983-4: Committee chaired by James Oswin reviewed the policy of localism in Australian commercial broadcasting.

1985: Forward Development Unit formed and investigated issues for future development of Australian commercial television. Equalisation the government highest priority in broadcasting policy. FDU identified two strategies to achieve equalisation: aggregation, or multi-channel services.

1986: Government announced a draft Indicative Plan would be produced to form the basis of decision-making for the implementation of equalisation. Aggregation the government's preferred option.

1986-7: A Senate Select Committee convened to report on the issue of television equalisation.

1987: The Broadcasting Act amended to provide for equalisation. The Indicative Plan published.

1989: Aggregation introduced in Approved Market C (southern New South Wales).

1990: Aggregation introduced in Approved Market A (Queensland).

1991: Aggregation introduced in Approved Market D (Victoria) and Approved Market B (northern New South Wales).

1992: Aggregation introduced in Tasmania with two competing stations.

STATIONS IN AGGREGATED AREAS OF AUSTRALIA

Approved Market A

FNQ Cairns

TNQ Townsville

Consolidated to become TNQ North Queensland, then QTV, and later purchased by Ten to become Ten Queensland.

MVQ Mackay

SEQ Maryborough

Operated as Sunshine Television, later purchased by Seven to become Seven Queensland.

SDQ Warwick

DDQ Toowoomba

RTQ Rockhampton

SDQ consolidated with DDQ to become DDQ/SDQ Darling Downs. Darling Downs TV and RTQ later purchased by WIN.

Approved Market B

ECN Taree

NEN Tamworth

Consolidated to become NEN New England/Mid North Coast, and later purchased by Prime.

NBN Newcastle

Owned by Washington H. Soul Pattinson and Co Ltd. Affiliated with the Nine Network but independently owned.

NRN Coffs Harbour

RTN Lismore

Became NRTV, later purchased by Ten.

Approved Market C

CBN Orange

CWN Dubbo

RVN Wagga Wagga

CBN and CWN consolidated to become CBN Central New South Wales, and later all became part of the Prime network.

WIN Wollongong

Became home station of the large WIN network, a wholly-owned subsidiary of Bruce Gordon's Oberon Broadcasters Pty Ltd. with stations in all Approved Markets except Approved Market B.

CTC Canberra

Marketed as Capital, later purchased by Southern Cross and marketed as Ten Capital.

Approved Market D**AMV Albury/Wodonga**

Operated by the Prime network.

BCV Bendigo**GLV Traralgon**

Operated as Sunraysia Television Limited, then Southern Cross. Marketed on air as Ten Victoria.

BTV Ballarat**GMV Shepparton**

Become known as RTV Western Victoria, later owned by Tasmanian-based ENT Ltd and operated as VTV or VIC-TV, then purchased by WIN.

Tasmania**TVT Hobart**

Owned by ENT, then purchased by WIN to become WIN Television Tasmania.

TNT Launceston

Owned by ENT, and purchased by Southern Cross.

A number of people from the television industry or wider media are quoted throughout this thesis. Their names, and positions at the time of interview, are:

Peter Gough	Group Chief Engineer, WIN Television
Colin Knowles	Director of Planning and Policy, Australian Broadcasting Authority
Mark Colson	Television General Manager, Victoria, Ten Victoria
Michelle Larmer	former journalist, Prime Wagga and newsreader, WIN Western news service
Andrew Bell	former Western News Director, WIN Television
Michael O'Grady	former production manager Northern Rivers TV
Peter Andren	Federal Member for Calare, formerly Prime News Editor, Orange
Ken Begg	former News Director Capital Canberra and Prime Canberra
Jim Sullivan	News Director, NBN Newcastle
Peter Cullen	Editor, <i>Illawarra Mercury</i>

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