Aggregation and regional television

Neryl East

University of Wollongong

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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

Graduate School of Journalism
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In particular, I would like to thank the management of WIN Television who allowed me access to their news library and various other company information. I would also like to acknowledge those who gave me formal interviews as part of my research. Their frank views on the subject added greatly to the store of information collected.

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

I also wish to acknowledge my supervisor, Professor Clem Lloyd, who encouraged my research in a largely undocumented area.

Finally I would like to thank my husband, Robert East, for sharing his vast television experience with me, contributing ideas and suggestions on my research, and supporting me throughout this lengthy process.
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.
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, Illawarra Mercury
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