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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

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

by

NERYL EAST, MA

Graduate School of Journalism
1998

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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.

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.

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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Appendix 3: Video Tape

INTRODUCTION

It would be a brave person who stood against a policy which has given greater variety in television services to people in regional Australia. The equalisation policy has done exactly that; residents of areas outside capital cities in the four eastern states now have access to more commercial television stations than they did in the mid 1980s.

For about 20 years, Australia's regional television stations had been part of the fabric of the local areas they served. Where city dwellers had access to an array of programs spread over two, and later three, commercial channels and the ABC, regional viewers had the ABC and their home-town station. They saw local advertisements which did not have the slick production of commercials shown in the city, but had a nice, cosy feel about them. They saw local news which covered stories like the book parade at the school their children attended, and meetings of their shire council. They watched telethons to raise money for the local children's ward, and other special programs about major local events. They only had one commercial station, but it usually showed the pick of programs screened on the big networks. They complained about the lack of choice, sometimes laughed at the slightly amateur presentation, but turned daily to the local station, as if it were a pair of comfortable old slippers.

In turn, the regional stations stuck by the people of their respective viewing areas through plenty of stormy weather; from the changeover in technology with the advent of colour in 1975, the loss of substantial revenue through the ban on cigarette advertising, to competition from more cost-effective production houses and the bite of the recession of the early 1980s. Through their local monopolies, they survived.

With the change of government in 1983, came a policy which would change the face of regional television in Australia. The broad concept was not new, as Davies explained:

As far back as the 1960s, the various Federal Governments have been concerned to provide a “fair go” for regional Australia by providing access to radio and television services. [1995, 5]

However, the equalisation policy, as it became known, specifically aimed to give viewers in regional areas the same program choices as their city counterparts, through three competing commercial channels and the ABC. The method ultimately chosen to implement equalisation was aggregation – combining existing monopoly regional television markets to create competitive services.

By 1997, eight years after aggregation began in earnest, that aim had been realised in New South Wales, Queensland, Victoria and, in a smaller way, in Tasmania, as the Department of Communications pointed out:

Almost five million people have access to these [large competitive] markets and now have a choice of commercial television services equivalent to that available to metropolitan viewers. [DOCA, Internet site]

But in their delight over the advent of more choice on their television screens, regional viewers seemed barely to have noticed the cost of equalisation. In areas where the policy was implemented, “local” television as it once existed, became all but a thing of the past. The fact that this development was accepted with barely a whimper of public protest does not lessen its impact on regional television in Australia. And the changes were felt particularly keenly in regional television newsrooms, where aggregation introduced competition, but not necessarily higher journalistic standards.

In this thesis a public policy context is provided for equalisation, and a brief history presented of its development and implementation in Australian regional television until 1997. While the thesis reflects the response of station administrators and the wider community to the equalisation policy, it also seeks to analyse the policy’s impact on journalists working in the regional television industry during and after the period of implementation.

The thesis seeks to establish whether equalisation fulfilled its primary aim of providing a wider choice of television stations for regional viewers, and to examine the policy's effect on existing regional monopolies, regional stations' relationships with the capital city networks, localism in regional programming, and the practice of journalism in regional television newsrooms.

Because equalisation in Australia is relatively new and still evolving, little exists in the way of sustained analysis on the subject. The thesis relies on material from primary sources: government reports, policy documents and legislation, reports from television stations and community organisations, television news reports, newspaper clippings, and interviews with those with current or recent experience in aggregated news markets. A large amount of information comes from the candidate's experience and observation as a player in the regional television industry from 1984 to 1994 (see bibliography p 266), and from contributions from journalists working in aggregated newsrooms who did not wish to be directly quoted because of possible ramifications for their careers.

An attempt has been made to provide an overview of all aggregated markets in Australia, and also touch on those yet to face equalisation. For detailed analysis the thesis concentrates on Approved Market C, based on southern New South Wales and including the major centres of Canberra, Wollongong, Wagga Wagga, Orange and Dubbo. This market was the pilot region for aggregation. A case study is included of the establishment of one news service, in the west of New South Wales.

CHAPTER ONE: THE PATH TO THE EQUALISATION POLICY

In the year the equalisation policy became reality, 1989, the ABT described it as “the biggest shake up in Australian regional television since its introduction in the 1960s.” [ABT 1989, 2] The economic logistics of providing additional local commercial television stations had previously appeared to some to be an “insurmountable problem.” [Oswin 1984, 266] The policy would mean a change to the very heart of regional television - a complete shift in the way local stations operated. To fully appreciate the extent of the change, it is necessary to examine key events in the establishment and development of regional television in Australia, with particular regard to policy on localism in broadcasting, and the various studies and reviews leading up to the implementation of aggregation.

Television comes to regional Australia

Television’s introduction to regional areas came within a few years of its inauguration in Australia. In 1950 the government had adopted a new policy, indicating that television would be developed on a gradual scale, beginning with the establishment of a national service in Sydney, followed by the issuing of commercial licences in some capital cities, and then, “as experience in the technical and preliminary aspects of television is obtained, consideration be given to the extension of the National Television Service to other capital cities and to the larger provincial areas.” [Oswin 1984, 34] A Royal Commission was appointed by the Menzies government in 1953, and its 1954 report echoed much of the existing policy:

Initially, two commercial licences should be granted in each of Sydney and Melbourne, with subsequent expansion in all capital cities and other centres of population (including the larger country towns) being effected as rapidly as circumstances permit, subject to the Minister being satisfied that any applicants for licences for these centres are capable of supplying a satisfactory service. [1984, 35]

Stage 1, involving the establishment of national and commercial stations in Sydney and Melbourne took place in 1956-57, followed by Stage 2 with stations in Brisbane, Adelaide, Perth and Hobart in 1959-60. On 30 April 1959, the Postmaster-General,

Charles Davidson, announced the introduction of Stage 3, covering the establishment of ABC and commercial stations in major provincial areas. The government invited applications for licences, saying at that stage the number of licensees in a given area would not necessarily be limited to one, but that priority would be given to “applicants which are local independent companies not associated with metropolitan stations. . .” [1984, 48] In subsequent Parliamentary debate, the Postmaster-General clarified that “not associated” actually meant “not associated financially.” Country stations would not be prevented from buying certain programs from metropolitan stations, provided they maintained their independence. In a display of some naivety regarding the costs of television production, Davidson went on to foreshadow that country programming would develop in much the same way as it had on radio:

A great deal of capital would not be required. Local sports and . . . local concerts could be televised. Such shows would not be available to the country people if a metropolitan station were piping its programmes from the city. [Oswin 1984, 50]

The Australian Broadcasting Control Board considered in depth the issue of country licensees being independent of the metropolitan networks. A number of licence applications were received from groups which did have an association with the metropolitan stations, and which argued that without such an association it would not be possible for country stations to provide a service that was comparable to that available in the cities. They claimed that a relay link direct from a capital city station was the cheapest and most effective way of bringing television to country Australia. The ABCB did not agree, saying:

It is desirable that the operations of stations should be controlled, in practice, by people who have some real interest in the areas concerned. [Oswin 1984, 64]

It pointed out that while local independent licensees would have to rely on “films or relays from other stations” for a large part of their programming, there should be “increasing opportunities for the televising of programmes of particular interest to country people.” The government accepted the ABCB’s recommendations for licensees, and announced in November 1960, that “for the present one station only, operated by a

local independent company, is to be licensed in each of the areas.” It also indicated the possibility of additional licences in the future:

As the service develops and the need for an ability to support a second independent station in any of the areas is demonstrated, the Government will entertain further applications and consider the granting of further licences. [1984, 67]

Stage 3, the establishment of commercial stations in many regional areas, was implemented in 1961-63. Country television became a reality in the ACT, the Central Tablelands, Newcastle-Hunter, Illawarra and Richmond-Tweed regions of New South Wales; Bendigo, Ballarat, and the La Trobe and Goulburn Valley regions in Victoria; Townsville, Rockhampton and the Darling Downs in Queensland; and the north east of Tasmania. Stage 4, from 1965-68, saw stations established at Broken Hill, the Central Western Slopes, Manning River area, Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area, Upper Namoi, Grafton-Kempsey, South West Slopes and Eastern Riverina in New South Wales; Upper Murray and Mildura in Victoria; Cairns, Mackay, Southern Downs and Wide Bay in Queensland; and regional areas of Western and South Australia. Additional commercial licences followed in stages 5 and 6. [Oswin 1984, 311-313]

According to Brown, there was “a progressive extension of services to provincial cities and, eventually, to the more sparsely populated rural areas of the country.” [1986, 116] In line with the government’s decision, regional commercial television developed in such a way that local interests could own or manage the licence and control the program schedule and commercials for their area. The very concept of localism, examined later in a government review, was deemed to refer broadly to the idea that commercial radio and television stations should be:

. . . individually operated units located in as many areas as possible, the size of the service area of a station being such as will reasonably permit the station to be commercially viable. [Oswin 1984, 5]

According to the ABT:

This has meant that single services have been phased in over a 30 year period as communities have been judged large enough to provide revenue

to support payment for the technical equipment to transmit and replay programs. [ABT 1985, 183]

There was a belief that both ownership and programming should be controlled at the local level, and “that the programming provided should cater for the particular needs and interests of the community within the station’s service area.” [Oswin 1984, 5] As a result, regional communities were able to see programs not only purchased from the metropolitan stations and other sources, but also those produced locally, together with locally-made commercials and local news.

By the early 1980s, there were 36 separate television viewing areas outside the state capitals, each of them having only one commercial station. These included the major provincial cities of Canberra, Newcastle and Wollongong. There were also 144 commercial translators, stations which re-transmitted the signal of a main station, and most of these were in regional areas. Eleven stations took all or most of their programs on relay from neighbouring stations. The ABT noted in 1984 that the 36 regional stations:

. . .do not comprise 36 separate markets, but for various purposes form about 20 markets based on the joint operations of two or more commercial television stations within a substantial region. [DOC 1985, 2]

A number of stations operating as monopolies in regional Australia had formed small, informal networks or groupings, usually based on common ownership or proximity in location. These included the Great Eastland regional network, comprising three sets of two jointly-owned stations; ECN 8 Taree, NEN 9 Tamworth, NRN 11 Grafton, RTN 8 Lismore, DDQ 10 Toowoomba and SDQ 4 Warwick, and the Southern Cross network; BCV 8 Bendigo and GLV 8 Sale. According to Brown:

To increase the advantages of network buys member stations generally provide nearly identical programming schedules. A few networks. . .make use of terrestrial microwave relays for the simultaneous transmission of programs by member stations, although the cost of such facilities inhibits a more extensive linking-up of regional channels. [1986, 124]

As well, the regional industry generally joined forces to secure better programming deals:

Most of the commercial television stations outside Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Adelaide participate in a joint purchasing arrangement (through their own company, Regional Television Australia Pty Ltd) whereby rights to Australian programs are acquired from the metropolitan networks or directly from the overseas distributors. [1986, 122]

Members of Regional Television Australia [RTA] also combined at times to produce Australian television programs, and promote member stations to advertisers.

Despite legislation on ownership and control, the metropolitan stations were in a powerful position to exert influence over their regional cousins, who relied on the networks for much of their on-air content. This had been demonstrated dramatically in the early 1960s when WIN Wollongong and NBN Newcastle were denied access to programs by the two existing Sydney networks, because of the chagrin of the Sydney owners, the Packers and Fairfaxes, at missing out on the Wollongong and Newcastle broadcasting licences. The regional stations' distress was emphasised by WIN:

The difficulty of procuring a sufficient supply of suitable programmes has been brought about by the Metropolitan Commercial Stations advising distributors of their intention to not purchase programmes if supplies are made available to WIN Channel 4 or the Newcastle Station NBN 3. [WIN Annual Report 1962]

NBN made a similar point:

The interests of your Company and those of the viewing public of the Newcastle-Hunter Valley area have been affected by the denial of a number of popular programmes to NBN Channel 3 in spite of express Government policy of making programmes available to local independent stations. [NBN Annual Report 1962]

The ABCB put pressure on the Sydney stations to try to stop their embargo, but, according to Bailey, "the stations took the Control Board to the High Court and they succeeded. However, when it became clear that the government intended to support the Control Board with legislation, the stations gave in." [1979, 10] The networks' influence steadily increased in the following two decades as Brown emphasised:

. . . the three metropolitan networks exert a substantial influence on commercial television. They commission practically all non-news programs produced in Australia, produce their own current affairs programs, control

the sale of this material to the rest of the country's commercial channels, and they are instrumental in importing a considerable proportion of the overseas produced programming broadcast on Australian commercial television. [1986, 123]

An ABT survey of non-network stations in September 1983 found that 57.3 per cent of total programs broadcast were Australian, and of these, the networks were the source of 47.1 per cent. Local studios provided 6.9 per cent, RTA 0.8 per cent, and other sources 2.5 per cent. RTA supplied the majority of the remaining overseas programs. It was also found that news, sport and light entertainment programs were usually delivered by the networks via relay - either landline or microwave link - and most drama material arrived by freight, that is, film or tapes were physically despatched to regional stations. O'Regan perceived the existence of a system where the "SMBA networks" (Sydney-Melbourne-Brisbane-Adelaide) controlled what programs were brought into Australia and the kind of programs produced here, but did not have control over the stations broadcasting this material:

This was control at the level of what was to be screened but not a control over either the conditions of screening or the profits to be had from them. In this way the Australian system was very different from the affiliated system in place for network/station relationship in the USA. [1987, 4]

Notwithstanding the regional stations' reliance on the metropolitan networks as a source of programming, many regionals had extensive production facilities of their own at the height of their monopolies, generating local news services, commercials, the whole gamut of variety shows and general entertainment programs, and special programs covering significant local events. They staged telethons and charity appeals, and were the focal point of community campaigns. Some stations also produced programs and commercials which in turn were taken up by the capital city networks. For example, the first colour videotape drama, *Silent Number*, was produced in Wollongong by WIN and shown around Australia. Furthermore, the regional stations possessed significant audience and commercial strength. In July 1983 the Great Eastland network was ranked as the sixth largest in Australia behind Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide and Perth, with 254,900 television homes, compared with Perth's 317,000. NBN Newcastle held a substantial monopoly market with 193,000 television homes. [DOC 1985, 3]

However, Brown noted that for the year ended 30 June 1982, the average profitability in dollar terms of the metropolitan stations was more than four times that of the regionals - \$4.78 million compared with \$1.03 million. [1986, 143] The ABT, while criticising the standard of regional services, pointed out that the limiting factors to improvement were “mostly financial.” [DOC 1985, 4] Advertising rates and national advertising on television had steadily increased since the early 1970s, but regional rates had increased more slowly than in the metropolitan markets. Even though regional licensees had one third of the total audience and 90 per cent of the stations, they received “little more than 20 per cent” of advertising revenue. This in turn limited the number of programs regional stations could produce locally, and increased their reliance on the metropolitan suppliers.

The satellite debate and supplementary licences

After considerable debate during the 1970s about the future of commercial television in Australia, the government in 1979 announced its decision in principle to establish a domestic communications satellite system, which, among other uses, would transmit television programs from the capital cities to regional areas. The move was widely seen as signalling major changes in the operation of commercial television in Australia. While formal and informal networks were already well in place using terrestrial means of program distribution, the coming of the satellite would mean a major difference to the cost and logistics of networking. Bill Rayner of CTC Canberra outlined its potential:

The coming satellite brought a new age. It focused attention on the fact that the limitations of terrestrial transmission would be overcome by new technology that could offer all Australians metropolitan services without regard to distance: three transmitters in the sky with a whole continent as the coverage area. [ABT 1988, 49]

O'Regan described the satellite as opening “a can of worms” because it would dramatically redraw audience boundaries, methods of program delivery and connections between locations: “Suddenly simultaneous programming appeared not only to be routinely possible rather than special, but also to be desirable.” [1987, 4]

In 1977, the government set up a task force to examine the satellite issue, and a working group was formed in 1978 to look further into the proposal. While both groups recommended the introduction of communications satellite services as early as practicable, there was confusion about the impact of such services on regional television. Supporters of the regional expansion, such as metropolitan operator Kerry Packer, argued that the satellite system would reduce the costs of distributing television programs, thus increasing the profitability of regional stations and creating a financially viable environment for new stations. However, not surprisingly, a number of regional operators disputed the viability of competition in their areas. According to O'Regan, the satellite represented a fundamental threat to the monopoly enjoyed by regional TV. No longer could it be argued that the cost of delivery was holding back the same comprehensive service to regional Australia already enjoyed in capital cities. [1987, 4] Davies also stressed the threat posed by the satellite to entrenched regional interests:

Not everyone was enamoured of Packer's vision for regional Australia, least of all the regional television licensees, who up until then had enjoyed a monopoly in their local areas. [1995, 6]

As Brown noted, the working group was only able to make a qualified statement that benefits of the satellite system *could* include the potential for a greater choice of television programs for regional viewers in *some* markets, and that to achieve these benefits there would need to be an extension of existing networking arrangements. [1986, 171]

Metropolitan operators argued that the system should resemble that already operating in the United States, with programs and national advertising broadcast by satellite from Sydney/Melbourne to regional areas, thereby extending the existing commercial television networking system. The ABT considered the networks' proposal, observing that networks and networking were the "heart and arteries" of the commercial television system:

The extension via satellite of a commercial television service comparable to that available in the State capitals to the whole of Australia will increase the importance of networks and networking in the system. [Senate Select Committee 1987, 33]

However, it recommended against it on a number of grounds, in particular the national extension of the influence of the Sydney-Melbourne stations, “which could have dire consequences for the viability of the system and regional stations in particular.” [DOTC 1990, 56] While there were those who regarded satellite services as essentially no different from terrestrial means of program distribution, others took the view that the satellite’s point-to-multi-point capacity provided a potential for the end of regional television as it was currently known:

Power would be concentrated in the hands of those who have the economic muscle to corner the market in programs. [Fell and Smith 1984, 31]

A Sydney-based public interest group, Communication Action, recommended that the ABT use debate over the satellite issue as an opportunity to explore “networking policies and practices” and institute some structural changes which would limit the capacity of the satellite to increase networking. [Fell and Smith 1984, 104]

With the emerging prospect of new regional stations being established due to development of the satellite, regional operators were anxious to see how any changes would affect them. WIN Television’s directors sought assurances from the government that the project would “not prejudice the existence of independent regional television stations. . .” [WIN Annual Report 1979] Similarly, NBN called on the government to ensure that “the regional television industry is protected”, and said:

Along with the other television stations in Australia, we are concerned with the proposal for a satellite communications system which could lead to the origination of many, if not all, programs from capital cities. This would have a detrimental effect on employment in our area and interfere with the local philosophy we adopt. [NBN Annual Report 1979]

A former News Editor at Prime Orange and later Federal Member for Calare, Peter Andren, recalled Packer attending an ALP forum in Orange in 1980, to answer questions on the satellite issue. At that stage regional operators were arguing for retention of local stations and the benefits they could bring to regional communities, including local news.

Metropolitan operators such as Packer countered that local commitment was overstated:

I can remember him clearly saying “here we are, Saturday afternoon, if half of Orange caught fire, you wouldn’t have a camera there”. And he was strictly very correct because they wouldn’t have. And he said, “what are you talking about, this news coverage and involvement and all that sort of stuff”, and they had egg on their faces, the regional stations. [Andren 1996, 1]

Andren said the threat of the satellite spurred regional licensees into action, leading to a boom in regional television production in the early to mid 1980s.

During the satellite debate there emerged a proposal to allow each regional operator access to two additional frequencies in their existing viewing areas. The supplementary licence scheme was intended to pave the way for the satellite distribution of programs. According to Brown, it also avoided any threat to the local stations’ commercial viability which would be posed by the licensing of new competitors in their markets. [1986, 181] Davies concluded that with the 1980 election looming, Fraser had sought to balance competing interests: giving voters in regional Australia more services, while at the same time keeping the often influential local media proprietors on side:

The compromise was a policy of supplementary licences, which allowed existing owners to apply for one or two more channels. [1995, 6]

Under the proposal, the regionals would take programs from each network, augmented by local material which would be shown in pre-arranged “windows”. Rayner supported the idea because it recognized that additional services were inevitable, and gave operators in small markets the potential to become communication centres. He believed many operators, however, saw only the costs of subjugation to the networks, and failed to recognize the opportunities. [ABT 1987, 50]

Legislation for the two-supplementary-licence scheme was subsequently torn up, replaced by legislation to allow regional operators to apply for one supplementary licence. There were delays in the process, with regional operators continuing to argue

that additional advertising revenue and cost savings from the satellite system would not be enough to offset the cost of setting up the proposed new services.

When the Hawke Labor government took office in March 1983, little progress had been made towards the granting of supplementary licences, with the enabling legislation passed by Parliament but not immediately proclaimed. However, the new government decided to press ahead with the supplementary licence system, announcing in November 1983 that it would accept licence applications. There were provisions for two supplementary licences to be granted to regional operators if the proposal had the support of the industry. There was also a proviso that new independent licences could be granted in some areas, if, on the recommendation of the ABT, such a move would be financially viable.

In the following two years there was little movement towards the establishment of any new regional television services, and the government was becoming frustrated with the supplementary scheme. Fraser noted that the debate over satellite services and networking had degenerated into “a contest between the unspeakable”, (greater power to the networks), “and the unwatchable”, (existing regional stations which, in Fraser’s opinion, had not performed well in terms of providing genuine localism). [1985, 9] The Minister for Communications, Michael Duffy, outlined the weaknesses:

Unfortunately this [supplementary] scheme has proved to be expensive for applicants, unwieldy for the Tribunal and unproductive for everyone concerned - particularly the viewers. Two years later a great deal of money has been spent but not a single licence has emerged. [DOC 1986, 19]

Clearly, if Labor was to succeed where previous governments “as far back as the 1960s” [Craik Bailey and Moran 1995, 5] had failed and introduce more equitable television services across Australia, more decisive action was needed - although Duffy stressed that he did not want to be overly critical:

At the time the supplementary licence scheme was created, most of us, including my Department, the industry and the present Opposition, welcomed it as a brave attempt to break the log-jam in broadcasting and

to establish new services. However, we now need to replace the scheme with a more productive and streamlined approach. [DOC 1986, 19]

According to Rayner, the single supplementary-licence system was doomed to failure because it still did not provide a method of equalising services between metropolitan and regional Australia. [ABT 1987, 51] The ABT had also concluded that supplementary licences did not appear to be the answer to providing services to all markets in regional Australia:

It also warned that Packer's proposal for US-style networking would reduce the role of the regional stations and increase the dominance of the networks, particularly the Sydney and Melbourne stations. [Craik Bailey and Moran 1995, 6]

The strength of the government's conviction on the issue of equity of services for country viewers, which became known as "equalisation", was highlighted in a statement by Duffy in October 1984 when he described the lack of viewer choice in many areas as "not a situation we are prepared to accept for very much longer. It is inequitable and discriminatory; moreover, it is unnecessary." [DOC Part 2 1985, 9] The broad intention of the equalisation scheme was to provide to most regional residents, television services which were equal to the services enjoyed by people living in Australian cities. Statements relating to equity aside, Davies felt that having committed to buying the satellite, Labor policy over the following decade had been made to fit the needs of the satellite:

It has been influential not only in shaping solutions to bringing television to regional Australia - its most obvious virtue - but also in triggering changes to the ownership laws, shaping options for pay TV and spurring deregulation of the telecommunications industry. [1995, 6]

The Oswin report

As the road to equalisation of regional television services became clearer, the government also announced a review of the policy of localism in Australian commercial broadcasting under the leadership of James Oswin, a senior officer with the Department of Communications. Minister Duffy said the need for such a review had become urgent "following recent Government decisions on Aussat Pty Ltd, satellite-related broadcasting services, and supplementary licences." [Oswin 1984, 284] As it turned out, the related

issues of satellite broadcasting services and supplementary licences were a key focus of many of the submissions to the review.

The Oswin report, *Localism in Australian Broadcasting*, documented the development of regional television, including the emerging reliance of regional stations on the metropolitan networks for their programming supply, which it described as a “quasi-national structure”. It noted that while the government of the day wanted regional television to develop in much the same way as local radio, the production and operating costs of the two media were not comparable:

A [television] station engaging in a significant degree of production needs a large and probably monopoly market to ensure an adequate financial return. [Oswin 1984, 148]

The report said that the ever-increasing strength of the metropolitan networks had its roots in several early government decisions. Allowing two licences in Brisbane and Adelaide rather than one meant that stations in those cities did not develop as local and independent entities, but became substantially dependent on the Sydney and Melbourne stations for programs, thus creating the environment for the extensive networking which then developed between all capital city stations. Furthermore, granting one independent licence in each country area, which at the time was designed to prevent further network domination, had been based on the somewhat flawed belief that regional stations would find the means to produce an increasing number of local programs:

It is now history that the areas licensed to be served by the stations were far too small to support independently operated units financially capable of producing substantial amounts of local programs. It was not long before the financial difficulties of independent operation became obvious, and the stations gradually entered into regular acquisition arrangements with the major networks. [1984, 150]

However, it was also made clear that while the choice of program sources was limited, individual stations had largely maintained control over programming and advertising decisions, “cherry-picking” from various networks rather than aligning themselves to one, scheduling network programs at different times and dates from the source station, and selling and scheduling their own advertising. As the report pointed out, “this is a result of both industry practice and the approach adopted by the ABCB and then the

ABT.” [154] The stations themselves made strong submissions to the Oswin review, maintaining that their independence ensured they provide “an adequate and comprehensive service” as required by law. “Nevertheless,” said the report, “it should be recognised that particular networking arrangements or agreements can, albeit infrequently, impinge on station independence.” [156]

The review adopted a working definition of “localism” from Regional Television Australia, which said that interpretation of the term needed to be flexible - applying sometimes to small communities, at other times to larger communities and cities, or entire regions. It described as local:

. . . those elements of regional station programming, advertising, community services and other activities which originate within its service area and are intended uniquely for its service area. [171]

With that in mind, some stations argued that the earlier ABT survey which found that local studio production accounted for 6.9 per cent of all programs broadcast in a sample week, did not take all facets of local programming into account. They said that when other elements like advertising, community service announcements and station identifications were counted, the percentage would increase two or threefold.

The report summed up the situation by saying commercial television exhibited a mix of local and national characteristics, and its localism had been significantly “compromised” because of the formation of metropolitan networks, the regional stations’ reliance on the networks for program supply, the fact that some country stations were receiving most or all of their programs on relay, and the emergence of a large degree of non-local ownership and control. It also said that the most frequent criticisms of the present structure related to lack of consumer choice. The cost of localism had been seen to be a reduction in the number of services available to non-metropolitan viewers, “arising from a policy of protecting the commercial viability of existing stations through planning and licensing decisions.” [207-8]

As well as the issue of choice, the report pointed to the relatively limited number of information sources for news and current affairs in provincial areas because of local monopolies. Another criticism expressed in submissions to the review was that the government's policy on encouraging Australian content on television meant that regional stations tended to fulfil their obligations by buying programs from the networks, rather than undertaking their own productions. Notwithstanding those and other criticisms, the review found that the existing policy of localism had led to broadcasting services which adequately served the community, and would continue to do so. It based its finding on a number of factors, including what it identified as "the existence of an important social need for identification at the community level," and the fact that local stations were perceived as contributing to the social and economic development of a community or region. It pointed out that many submissions to the review expressed concern that the introduction of "city-oriented" television services might endanger the contribution made by local stations:

While people are interested in gaining access to additional services, they are not prepared to do so if the cost is the loss of their local service. This reflects the value and importance attached to a local station. [226-7]

Further, it said that a "significant number" of submissions from parties other than television stations put forward the view that while localism did prevent the establishment of additional services (through reduction in commercial viability because of the need for local production), the benefits derived from having a single local station greatly outweighed the perceived costs of missing out on a number of non-local services. [258]

The review also observed that many parties making submissions were adamant that development of satellite-related broadcasting services and supplementary licences should go ahead "on the basis of the maintenance of the policy of localism." [260] It went further in its conclusions, saying "great care will have to be taken to see that increased choice does not mean decreased localism or worse a substandard service from both stations." [266] However, it also said there was a "crying need" for additional television services in regional areas of Australia, and that there was no evidence that the supplementary licence plan would compromise localism in any way. In fact, "it could be

said that localism is essential for any new service to succeed either in regional or metropolitan areas.” [265] The report recommended that localism should continue to be government policy, and should be maintained with the granting of the first supplementary licence, to be reviewed again only on the consideration of second supplementary licences. Individual stations:

. . . should remain in absolute control of their program make-up and presentation no matter by what means the program is delivered to the station. [278]

The Forward Development Unit report

In February 1985, a newly-formed Forward Development Unit [FDU] within the Department of Communications investigated issues raised by the report on satellite services and the Oswin review of localism, and identified options for the future development of commercial television. The unit worked in co-operation with the broadcasting industry, unions, consumers and other interested parties. Its tasks were to study the possible impacts of new technologies on the commercial radio and television broadcasting system (although radio was deferred for future study), and to identify long-term options for structural change in the commercial broadcasting industry. At the time Duffy described equalisation as the “main thrust” of government policy, saying scenarios for change needed to be identified which would eventually provide a basic level of service to all Australians, regardless of where they lived or worked:

It will be necessary, particularly to think creatively about the role of local broadcasters. Their roles may be subject to major change. [DOC Part 2 1985, 3]

It appeared that the FDU did not have an easy task. As Fraser observed, Duffy and sections of his Department disagreed over the urgency of implementing equalisation. The FDU was established outside the division of the Department officially responsible for policy on new communications technologies, and had the job of considering what Fraser described as a concept representing “a radical departure from traditional licensing policy”, with “equally radical practical implications if implemented in the short-term.” [1985, 22]

By May 1985, the equalisation of commercial television services had become “the government’s highest priority” in broadcasting policy. [DOC 1985, 7] The government did not yet have preferred options on the policy’s implementation, but wanted equalisation to be in place in the majority of regional areas in three years, but no later than 1990. Duffy underlined the importance of industry co-operation in the equalisation of services, in a speech entitled *At the Barrier*, presented at a seminar of the Federation of Australian Commercial Television Stations [FACTS] in Sydney on 28 May. He said that the advent of the satellite system and the availability of live relay of programs to regional stations, had changed forever the accepted patterns of responsibility for station output:

We need flexibility, frankness and imagination - perhaps even some daring; certainly we need the full co-operation and help of the commercial television industry itself. . . As an industry, you must be ready to contemplate considerable changes in your roles; as a Government, we must be ready to re-write rules which have been accepted for thirty years. . . Equalisation is a massive task, equivalent to the work involved in the introduction of television itself. [DOC Part 2 1985, 7-13]

The FDU’s report of June 1985, *Future Directions for Commercial Television*, described equalisation, which it defined as the progressive provision of three services to all Australians, as heralding “a turning point in the development of the commercial television system,” along with satellite delivery of programs. [1985, 39] In his foreword, Departmental Secretary Robert Lansdown noted that, like the so-called metropolitan networks, regional licensees were not a homogenous group:

They range from prime regional stations with considerable resources and influence, such as the Newcastle, Canberra and Wollongong stations, to small local stations, which because of their limited resources are confined to a reactive role. [DOC Part 1 1985, v]

The FDU noted that 35 per cent of the 1.7 million Australian television homes, were served by regional commercial television stations. The concept of equalisation was a reflection of the general attitude of Australian society that all should have equal access to basic goods and services:

Television has become so much a part of people’s daily lives that it can no longer be regarded as a luxury. Indeed many Australians have come to

regard broadcasting services as so essential that they will not live and work in areas which do not have access to them. [11]

After a four-month period of consultation, the FDU identified two strategies which might lead to equalisation. Approach A was **aggregation**, and Approach B, **multi-channel services (MCS)**. Approach A would combine existing markets to create three competitive services in each. Approach B, a reflection of the original supplementary licence model, meant existing, non-competitive licensees would be allowed to provide three services in their monopoly market. The Unit made it clear, however, that different approaches might be necessary in different areas, depending on specific circumstances.

The ABT favoured aggregation over MCS, because aggregation was seen as allowing viability as well as competition, while MCS would dispense with local competition in the interests of commercial viability. Further, the ABT concluded that MCS had the potential to threaten both viability and competition:

Local content levels would be likely to be reduced because of the effect on local station profitability. . . The provision of locally-relevant services will be affected as there is likely to be substantial commonality of scheduling of programs across stations with limited scope for local origination. [DOC 1985, 14]

In addition, the ABT said aggregated markets would need to be much larger than the existing local markets, the FDU commenting:

. . . it is no exaggeration to observe that the whole policy of equalisation rests upon financial considerations, for unless existing or new licensees can afford to establish and operate two new services, all else is academic. [13]

The Unit threw its weight behind the aggregation option, saying that ultimately MCS might have to be treated as an interim step, “necessary to provide equalisation in the time-scale required by the Government, but to be superseded over time by more competitive structures based on Approach A.” [22] The FDU predicted that the introduction of equalisation, along with satellite distribution of programs, would change the commercial television system in several significant ways. Programs from the three metropolitan networks would be more readily available to regional station and the

satellite would mean greater access to the relay of programs in “real time”, eliminating the delay of distributing programs to country stations by terrestrial means. The ABT had earlier commented:

Some of the most popular programs broadcast in the major markets are not broadcast in regional areas, and those that are, are often shown months or even years after initial broadcast in their cities of origin. [DOC 1985, 39]

The FDU saw the cost of terrestrial distribution of programs as directly related to distance, which had effectively prevented many programs being shown in “real time”. It said, however, that satellite distribution costs were transparent to distance, so it was likely that such simultaneous programming would develop. Regional stations would save money through a reduction in videotape freight, handling and storage costs, and there would also be a greater commonality in program schedules across Australia. Originating network stations would be likely to organise their transmissions to allow for “real time” transmission “by operating to exact pre-arranged network start times, standardised [commercial] break structures, and so on.” [40] Another major change to the television industry to be brought by equalisation would be the linking of regional licensees with particular metropolitan networks, either as network partners or affiliates. Here the FDU warned that regional licensees could find themselves “locked into” one metropolitan network with little alternative for source of programming. [42]

A number of studies were commissioned on the commercial viability of both aggregation and MCS. One report, by Nigel Dick and Associates, commissioned by the FDU, concluded that the introduction of equalisation should be staggered, with an interim introduction of supplementary licenses, because aggregation alone would not produce sufficient revenue to provide satisfactory financial returns in the short term. [71] Dick found that most markets could sustain one supplementary service immediately, and a second could be phased in five to eight years later. Another report, by Coopers and Lybrand, commissioned by United Telecasters on behalf of the licensees of the six Sydney and Melbourne commercial stations, examined the proposed aggregated market of Wollongong, Canberra and Wagga/Albury. It found that the projected trading results

before tax for each of the three licensees examined would continue to be substantial and higher satisfactory returns on revenue earned would be achieved:

A review of other regional licensee financial information leads to the conclusion that under an aggregation concept in other areas, licensees in those areas would continue to be profitable and financially viable. [DOC Part 2 1985, 132]

The report assumed that there would be a considerable sharing of facilities among licensees in each aggregated market. Its findings were disputed in another report, commissioned by Regional Television Australia, which predicted a severe decline in profitability:

The operation of three stations in regional markets, especially if they are in the aggregated form as described, will set in motion a pattern of over-supply and in our view will lead to savage [advertising] rate cutting and an ultimate decline in the revenue base. [Part 2 1985, 189]

The RTA report also rejected the assumption of a 15 per cent growth per annum in regional revenue, comprising a 10 per cent inflation rate and real growth of 5 per cent:

There is no evidence supporting the choice of a 5 per cent real rate, and we are of the view that such a rate is not sustainable. . . We have instead assumed a real rate of growth of nil. [Part 2 1985, 190-191]

According to the RTA report, the networks, through the Coopers and Lybrand report, had underestimated operational costs and shown “a degree of naivety. . .for example, with regard to the sharing of technical facilities in a ‘competitive’ situation.” In conclusion, the report said the financial results from the study were “nothing less than disastrous”. [Part 2 1985, 224, 229] Another consultant, Hart, Frankel and Company, looked at the likely impact of equalisation on production and employment. It predicted an increase in regional employment, particularly for technical and administrative staff, but said increasing employment for program production personnel was unlikely:

Regional production will become progressively more marginalised: there will be little incentive for local production when programmes can be obtained with less effort from metropolitan stations particularly via the satellite. [Part 2 1985, 431]

When considering policy issues arising from equalisation, the FDU listed localism as one of five major broadcasting policy objectives, observing that localism could be affected by

equalisation, “but it anticipated that the Government or the ABT would act to ensure no decrease if this became necessary”. [DOC 1985, xxvii] It was assumed that total expenditure on locally produced or locally oriented programs and advertising available through three services in each market, would at least be equal to that provided through the existing solus service. The FDU said that while regional operators would still want some control over program distribution, it was not unreasonable to expect that some regional stations could eventually transmit at least 80 per cent of programs taken on direct relay from metropolitan networks. However, the overall mix of programs that would be screened in regional areas was likely to be not too different to the present mix of local material (news, other programs, advertisements) and other programs, with the bulk of material falling into the advertisement category:

Contrary to some popular views, the broadcasters who took part in meetings with the FDU do not expect equalisation to diminish local content. Indeed, their assumption, based on North American experience, is that under any aggregation scenario, local programming would be a very important component of competition between stations, and might even increase. [1985, 118]

If MCS were to go ahead, a decision would need to be made on how local material would be broadcast; carried on the existing channel, divided between the three channels, or simulcast on all three.

The draft Indicative Plan

A Committee of Ministers, advised by a Departmental Task Force, was convened to consider the FDU report. In May 1986, Duffy made a major policy statement, *Regional Commercial Television in Australia; the Next Decade*, in which he announced that an Indicative Plan would be published, to form the basis of decision-making for the implementation of equalisation in regional television in Australia. A draft of the plan would be submitted for consideration by the government by 31 July 1986, followed by a time for the public and industry to comment. The final plan was to be submitted by 31 October 1986.

Like the ABT, the government preferred aggregation over MCS as the path to equalised services because of the competitive aspect of aggregation, coupled with concern that MCS would only serve to increase the monopoly held by the sole regional licensees in each area. It had now identified three strategic goals for regional television services, for the decade 1986-96. The first, **equalisation**, was “to provide services in most regional areas comparable to those in the capital cities.” The second, **aggregation**, was to “create larger, more viable markets in regional Australia.” The third, **competition**, was to “prevent extension of existing regional monopolies.” [DOC 1986, 16] In his policy statement, Duffy summarised the fundamental issues:

Those of us who live in major metropolitan areas take for granted the fact that we can choose between five services; ABC, SBS and three commercial channels (except in Perth). But in Ballarat and Bendigo, Tamworth or Tumut, there is only one commercial service and on average that service is available seven hours per day less than in the metropolitan areas. Try as they may - and their record is a very good one - commercial television licensees cannot show on one channel all of the most popular programs broadcast in the metropolitan areas. [DOC 1986, 17]

Duffy said it was expected that from 1988, residents of regional Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria would have access to three commercial channels. Development would be slower in the less populous states and in small, isolated areas viewers might initially have access to only two services. However, by 1990 nearly all Australians living in regional areas could expect at least one extra service and “most would have two”. [17] The government conceded that the equalisation process would necessitate changes in the rules of ownership and control, to facilitate early aggregation and allow the development of larger regional groupings. A detailed study of ownership and control legislation was undertaken. The outcome was a relaxation of ownership rules, but a proviso that no licensee was permitted to hold more than one licence within an approved market. In some cases, two licences were consolidated into one. According to the draft Indicative Plan, the effect of this consolidation would be an increase in the audience size in certain approved markets, maintaining three services while at the same time making the market more viable.

Colin Knowles, Director of Planning and Policy with the Australian Broadcasting Authority (formerly the Tribunal), said the aggregation plan was not based on any overseas model, as nothing similar existed:

Australia is somewhat unique in the way its industry is structured. In America it's basically all free enterprise. . .you've got a range of stations operating, from big networks down to mum and dad standing in front of a camera reading the news from the newspaper. A lot of them affiliate with the networks. [Knowles 1996, 2]

He said Europe was dominated by national broadcasters, and there was also the "public service" model, where governments funded extensions to services, as the government funded the extension of the ABC throughout Australia: "I think this [equalisation] was really a different approach, recognising that the world was getting smaller and that little micro television stations weren't really a real solution." [Knowles 1996, 2]

The regional television industry maintained its concern about the economic pressures that would come from competition as a result of aggregation. RTA argued that advertising revenue for regional stations would not increase at all from 1986 to 1996, and that even in large markets, stations would have trouble moving straight to an aggregated system with such limited resources. Financial consultant Peter Smith and Partners of Adelaide was engaged by the government to examine the financial performance of regional television stations. As a result of Smith's report, the Minister responded to RTA by saying that its earlier scenario of zero growth was "unrealistic and pessimistic." [DOC 1986, 18] He said that real revenue growth for regional stations had been well above that prediction, ranging between 9.3 per cent and 13.9 per cent per annum from 1973-74 to 1983-84. The financial analysis showed that the viability of commercial operators was relatively insensitive to changes in capital, operating costs or revenue increments arising from greater competition. It found that long-term revenue was the real factor to be considered, and that an increase in real terms of 4 per cent per annum was sufficient to provide a financial base for aggregation in most markets. The financial consultant also noted that if three services of different size in terms of revenue were to be aggregated, they would all become of a similar size. The service which

previously had the lowest revenue would increase its revenue, while the station with the highest revenue might experience a decrease:

As costs would increase for all three because they would be serving larger areas, then unless more revenue could be attracted, profits would be reduced for the two larger stations. [DOC 1986, 221]

While the government's preferred path to equalisation was aggregation rather than MCS, the industry was given a choice. Licensees would have the option of moving immediately to aggregation, or, as an interim measure, of providing an MCS system in their market. They were expected to make their decision known by January 1987. The choice was on a "one-in-all-in" basis. If one licensee in an approved market chose immediate aggregation, all licensees in that market would be obliged to aggregate, forming a large, combined market in which all licensees would compete. If none of the licensees in an area opted for aggregation, all would be granted MCS permits. If a licensee made no choice, they would be deemed to have chosen aggregation. RTA had argued that its members should be allowed at least ten years of MCS operation before aggregation was implemented. The government allowed that choice, saying that if licensees opted for MCS, their areas would be expected to be fully aggregated, with three competitive commercial services, by 1996.

During the discussion over whether or not to choose aggregation, WIN put forward an expanded version of the multi-channel proposal. It argued that each regional station should be granted two supplementary licences which would still give viewers the desired extra choices. However, the view was rejected by the government, which said it would not satisfy the need to introduce competition and would further increase the monopoly already held by the regional stations.

MCS had many down-sides to it, and ultimately, after considerable debate within individual stations, none of the regional licensees opted for it. According to the Group Chief Engineer of WIN Television Ltd, Peter Gough, it was really a "Hobson's choice":

If you chose MCS you had a five year window on it, and at the end of the five years you had to sell those two licenses and there was no tax rebate

on it, so it wasn't really an attractive option. Aggregation, clearly, was the only option. [Gough 1996, 5]

Under aggregation, the government expected the existing competition between the metropolitan networks to be brought to the regions, but local stations would also compete for local advertising revenue. It was also anticipated that competition would lead to increased efficiency of operations. According to Knowles:

There was always going to be someone in each market who was anxious to get into somebody else's market. So in the bigger markets [aggregation] happened really fast, with people wanting it to happen ahead of time. [Knowles 1996, 1]

The question of exactly who the players in each new market would be had been examined at length. The draft Indicative Plan stated:

Since equalisation in 1986 relates to three commercial television services in the capital cities. . .it is obviously convenient to group existing service areas in threes. [DOC 1986, 72]

However, it said that there was no reason why approved markets should be limited to groups of three existing service areas. Earlier, the Forward Development Unit had said that while some observers might want even more than three licences per market, "it must be recognised that television is a capital intensive and skill intensive industry - a game for big players. Accordingly, [three] is probably the optimum in regional areas". [DOC 1985, 119]

Six approved markets were identified in the eastern states. At that stage, South Australia, Western Australia and Tasmania were judged to be too small to support three competitive services. In Tasmania, the aim would be to introduce two services, with potential for a future third service. In the draft Indicative Plan, the government proposed the following configurations;

Market 1; Cairns/Townsville, Mackay and Rockhampton.

Market 2; Maryborough and Toowoomba/Warwick

Market 3; Lismore/Coffs Harbour and Tamworth/Taree

Market 4; Newcastle, Orange/Dubbo and Griffith

Market 5; Wollongong, Canberra and Albury/Wagga Wagga

Market 6; Mildura, Ballarat-Shepparton and Bendigo/Traralgon.

The draft Plan had put forward what it termed “minimal aggregation”, that is, the smallest markets which could be regarded as capable of supporting three competitive services. It said that the smaller the approved markets, the more likely they would represent identifiable “communities of interest”. Some argued for larger approved markets; one in Queensland, two in regional New South Wales, and one taking in all of regional Victoria and Tasmania. RTA argued strongly against minimal aggregation, saying that a population of approximately one million would be needed to support three services, given that Perth, with a population of that size, was at the time only just in the process of obtaining its third service. Even then, it said, approved markets in regional areas would suffer a cost penalty because the spread of their geography would necessitate a larger capital investment in transmission and distribution equipment. According to Knowles, “the original plan basically provided for a complicated arrangement of aggregation which nobody really wanted.” [Knowles 1996, 1] He said industry representatives came to the Department of Transport and Communication and offered to work with it in formulating the strategy, in the hope of making it more realistic from a commercial point of view.

An important element in the debate over approved markets was the prospect of licensees inserting windows of locally produced material into what would essentially be a feed of programming from the local station’s network affiliate. The Broadcasting Act was amended in 1985, to allow local stations to originate programs and advertising from any transmitter in their area, where previously they had been required to provide the same programming from all transmitters throughout their market. The change would encourage localism, with the ability to direct specific programs to individual local communities. According to the draft Indicative Plan:

The ability to insert ‘windows’ of locally produced material will clearly be of great importance in the proposed AMs (approved markets) which, in some cases, include very large areas. [DOC 1986, 45]

It said licensees would have the opportunity to tailor services, including advertising, to some extent to suit particular areas within their approved market. This was particularly important given that the ABT’s requirements regarding local programming content

would still have to be met under an equalised system. “Against a background of national program ‘feeds’ accounting for more than 80 per cent of programs, local insertion will be essential in order to allow for programming of local, regional and State oriented material,” the draft Plan stated. Engineering consultants Tom O’Donohue and Associates Pty. Ltd, who were engaged to assist in the preparation of the draft Plan, explored the arguments:

While the requirements for local content in new expanded regional markets are not as yet defined, a basic assumption is made that at a minimum the insertion of local content in a technical sense must be possible. [1986, 96]

O’Donohue also flagged what would become another important technical aspect of aggregation; the ability to easily re-package or make changes to program products, such as station identification clips, promotional material and even advertising. “The imaginative use of such techniques can greatly assist in rationalising the operational costs for dependent broadcasters.” [139]

The Senate report

With arguments continuing about the feasibility of the overall policy, a Senate Select Committee was convened to report on the issue of television equalisation. Chaired by Senator Graham Richardson, the eight-member Committee’s terms of reference were to report on the provisions of the *Broadcasting Amendment Bill 1986* and the *Television Licence Fees Amendment Bill 1986* and their implications in the light of new broadcasting and technology developments, and the government’s policy statements on ownership. The Bills were part of a package of legislation, intended to restructure the regulation of commercial television ownership - and eventually commercial radio ownership - throughout Australia.

The Bills set out a range of factors to be considered when determining which areas would be covered by approved markets. These included the desirability of approved markets consisting of existing service areas which were “as close to one another as practicable,” and that reflected, as far as practicable, “community of interests.” Most

important was the desirability of an approved market being able to support the provision of three competitive services, “as soon as practicable, and in any case no later than the aggregation completion date for the approved market.” There was also the consideration that an approved market should be wholly within one state and one time zone. [Senate Select Committee 1987, 58]

A number of issues had re-emerged during consideration of the Bills. One was whether viewers would have access to a wider choice of programs if supplementary licences were to be issued, rather than introducing new, competitive television services into the various regional viewing areas. The Senate Committee also looked at the contentious issue of whether the designated markets would be large enough to sustain three competitive stations, and considered whether the local content of regional television programming would be undermined as a result of the policy. The broad issue of whether viewers would actually be better off by replacing regional monopolies with competitive television services, was scrutinised.

In considering the issue of localism in regional television and its future under aggregation, the Committee’s report predicted that the significance of localism might decrease in the future, with the increased use of satellite technology for program distribution. It acknowledged, however, the importance of news as an element of local programming, and pointed out that the 1985 amendment to broadcasting legislation allowing “windows” - program segments originating from a different source to the bulk of the program - could be applied to both advertising and general programming. While acknowledging suggestions that aggregation would undermine localism in regional commercial television, the Committee concluded that the impact would not be crucial:

Whilst it is unlikely that the introduction of three competitive services would treble the demand for, and the supply of, local programs, it is equally unlikely that aggregation will undermine these. Viewers’ preference for localism will presumably provide some competitive incentive for the regional licensees to include locally produced programs. [1987, 150]

Concern was again expressed to the Committee about regional stations in approved markets aligning themselves with metropolitan networks, and the danger of the networks gaining more influence and control. However, the Committee argued that if such alignments did occur, the regional stations might end up with more influence in decisions about planning, production and distribution of programs, than they currently held as mere customers. By that stage, the following alignments were being considered:

Queensland;

Channel A; provided by FNQ/TNQ

Channel B; Shared by MVQ serving Cairns, Townsville, Mackay, and SEQ, serving Rockhampton, Maryborough and Darling Downs

Channel C; provided by RTQ serving Cairns, Rockhampton, Mackay and Townsville, and DDQ/SDQ serving Maryborough and Darling Downs

Northern New South Wales;

Channel A; provided by NEN/ECN

Channel B; provided by RTN/NRN

Channel C; provided by NBN

Southern New South Wales;

Channel A; provided by CTC

Channel B; provided by WIN

Channel C; provided by CBN/CWN serving Canberra, Wollongong, Orange and Dubbo, and RVN serving Wagga Wagga

Victoria;

Channel A; provided by BTV/GMV

Channel B; provided by BCV/GLV

Channel C; provided by AMV

The Committee received evidence of “considerable dissatisfaction with existing regional television services”, citing that 36 regional services enjoyed a monopoly in their respective viewing areas, and that 35 per cent of the population had access to only one commercial service. [1987, 81] In its report, the Committee harked back to the Minister’s Speech to the House in 1983, in which he expressed the government’s concern about areas where viewers had no choice of commercial services:

There is a considerable imbalance at present between people living in large metropolitan areas, who can choose between two or three commercial television services, and those in regional areas, who have only one service. . . It is a major objective of the government’s broadcasting

policy to provide communication services to those Australians who do not have access to them, or who have access to only one commercial radio or television service. [1987, 82]

It also referred to the FDU report, and its statement that “many Australians have come to regard broadcasting services as so essential that they do not live or work in areas which do not have access to them.” [DOC 1985, 11]

The Committee did not respond sympathetically to claims by regional television owners that equalisation was likely to be “economically disastrous”. It noted that “with the announcement of equalisation, the share market has re-valued the shares of these same operators significantly - and all upwards.” [1987, 86] Its report pointed out the different interpretations of the word “viability”, with the licensees translating it as “profitability”, and the ABT defining it as the ability to exist in the market place, that is, to service a licence. [25] It said that equalisation would increase the available advertising airtime for regional operators “by a factor of two or three.” [13] However, it also acknowledged the doubts expressed over whether advertising revenue would continue to increase.

The MCS option was considered in some detail, after the Committee received suggestions that advertising revenue “would be likely to remain stable under a MCS system, although it might drop under aggregation.” [107] But the Committee noted that MCS would significantly increase operating costs, and it was swayed by the ABT’s view that it was highly unlikely that all eligible stations would be in a position to provide even one supplementary service of a reasonable standard. About half the regional stations did not appear to be strongly placed financially to provide a second or third service, “at a standard equivalent to their existing operations.” [108] The Committee also expressed doubt as to whether viewers would want the granting of additional services to existing operators in their region:

The multi-channel services option would preserve the existing monopolies in regional areas if it were to be treated as an end rather than as a means to equalisation. The Committee does not consider that this is desirable. [109]

On the other hand, it said aggregation would introduce a wider range of program choice through competitive services, while allowing each licensee to continue to take advantage of satellite program distribution from the networks. [124]

With four members dissenting, the Committee's report recommended that the Bills be passed, and "that the government should seek to provide three commercial television services throughout regional Australia as soon as is practicable." [87] The report also recommended that the one-in-all-in rule be abandoned, and that all licensees should be required to proceed directly to aggregation, without the option of ten years of MCS.

Summary

It can be seen that equalisation evolved as a result of debate over the emergence of satellite technology which threatened to increase the already strong influence of metropolitan television networks. Consideration of a supplementary licence scheme gave way to the Hawke Labor government's stated intention to pursue equity of commercial television services for viewers around Australia. Of the two paths put forward to achieve equalisation; aggregation and multi-channel services, aggregation came to be the favoured option of both the government and the majority of regional licensees.

Coupled with the political appeal of introducing a system which would give non-metropolitan viewers a wider choice of television stations was concern that the development of more services would reduce localism in regional television. However, the belief prevailed that localism would be maintained under the new policy. Following chapters will examine whether such a belief was well-founded, particularly in relation to the provision of local news.

CHAPTER TWO: IMPLEMENTATION OF THE EQUALISATION POLICY

In August 1987, the Broadcasting Act was amended to provide for the equalisation policy. The amended Act included as its objectives that:

- a) persons living in regional areas of Australia have, as soon as practicable, access to three commercial television services; and
- b) commercial television stations in regional areas of Australia:
 - (i) service larger and commercially more viable markets; and
 - (ii) provide television services on a competitive basis. [*Broadcasting Act 1942, amended 1987 - Sect 94, Commonwealth Consolidated Acts*]

The Minister for Transport and Communications, Senator Gareth Evans, was charged under Part IIIC of the Act with preparation and publication of the Equalisation of Regional Commercial Television Indicative Plan outlining approved markets, aggregation areas, licensees to be affected, and licensees eligible for consolidation. Under the legislation, licensees would elect whether they wished to move to equalisation through the direct aggregation option, or through MCS, followed by aggregation. As discussed earlier, all stations eventually opted for direct aggregation. Each licensee had to submit an implementation plan for approval by the Minister, dealing with aspects such as installation of transmitters in their newly expanded viewing area, and projected dates for increased market coverage. There were rewards for compliance with the plan, including fee rebates. As Colin Knowles of the ABA noted:

They all complied. There were some teeth in the Act which said “if you don’t submit a plan, the Minister will determine one for you”. [Knowles 1996, 5]

With the equalisation policy proceeding through the aggregation option, the government examined the way the newly-aggregated markets could be positioned. The Department ultimately accepted the argument that the population in each market would need to be at least one million people to enable the participating licensees to break even:

One conclusion was that aggregation of areas of less than a million people were too small, so that changed the building blocks. In Queensland there were too many players. . .but the market took care of the problem. [Knowles 1996, 1]

Even with that consideration, there was widespread belief among licensees that one station in each market would have difficulty in surviving. According to Peter Gough of WIN Television:

One out of the three would have a hell of a job one way or the other, but the government said, 'well, that's a commercial thing - to make it work we'll make each market about a million people,' and that's about what it is. Each of the four mainland ones have a little over a million each. Tasmania's about 150,000 and that's why there's two stations and not three, because there just clearly wasn't enough to divide three ways. [Gough 1996, 5]

There was also a certain amount of consolidation, as foreshadowed in the change in ownership rules. The ABT said: "In some instances, two licenses have been or will be consolidated into one." [ABT 1991, 12] The groupings would also facilitate the carrying of programs from the three metropolitan networks. In the 1987 Indicative Plan, the government designated four approved markets for implementation of the policy. Where previously regional operators had broadcast into one area with no commercial competition, they now had an expanded viewing area and commercial competitors.

The approved markets were defined as follows:

Approved Market A (Queensland), to be aggregated in 1990

FNQ 10 Cairns
TNQ 7 Townsville
MVQ 6 Mackay
RTQ 7 Rockhampton
SEQ 8 Maryborough
SDQ 4 Warwick
DDQ 10 Toowoomba

Approved Market B (northern New South Wales), to be aggregated in 1991

RTN 8 Lismore
NEN 9 Tamworth/Taree
NBN 3 Newcastle
NRN 11 Coffs Harbour

Approved Market C (southern New South Wales), the pilot aggregation market, to begin in 1989

CBN 8 Orange
CWN 6 Dubbo
WIN 4 Wollongong
CTC 7 Canberra

RVN 2 Wagga Wagga

Approved Market D (Victoria), to be aggregated in 1992

AMV 4 Albury/Wodonga

BCV 8 Bendigo

BTV 6 Ballarat

GLV 8 Traralgon

GMV 6 Shepparton

Because markets had been set up in such a way that the existing stations either grouped or were likely to group into the three that were necessary to carry the network programs, a number did not fit into the equation. Four areas in eastern Australia - Broken Hill, Mount Isa, Mildura and Griffith - were left outside the legislation, while, according to the ABT, the Minister considered “alternative ways to deliver additional services to these areas.” [ABT 1989, 3] Tasmania would be included by the mid 1990s, but with only two stations to cater for its smaller population.

The pilot area, Market C, or southern New South Wales, [Map 1], would form an enormous viewing area combining WIN-TV’s existing region from Helensburgh, just south of Sydney, to the Victorian border, Canberra-based Capital’s area [CTC] from Goulburn to Bombala, and the already massive Prime area (combining CBN Orange, CWN Dubbo and RVN Wagga) which took in a third of western New South Wales, from Coonabarabran to the north, to Tumut in the south, and west to Cobar and Narrandera. Geography meant that some parts of the new approved market were more lucrative than others. Market C contained the affluent Canberra area and the rapidly developing Wollongong/South Coast area, offset by the less appealing commercial prospect of the state’s west.

For commercial purposes, licensees divided their new markets into smaller viewing areas, often based around the original boundaries of the regional monopoly markets. In Market C for example, some operators split the region into four areas; Canberra, Wollongong, central west and south west. Each viewing area received the same basic programming, with different commercials and, in some cases, different local news services. Various methods were employed to achieve this end. WIN Television installed technology to

enable programming to be “switched” to all four markets from one central location at its Wollongong studios. Prime, in comparison, initially chose to co-ordinate its programming at a local level, from stations located in each of the four viewing areas. Capital continued to co-ordinate programming for the extended market from its Canberra headquarters. According to Knowles:

At the time we did it I think technology had reached the point where it was much easier to continue to provide a localised service from a central place than it would have been even five years earlier, because you wouldn't have had the switching capability to do it. . . .Some people did spend more on automation than they needed to, because it was new technology. [Knowles 1996, 2]

These technological advances, which allowed specific local commercials to be targeted at particular viewing areas rather than broadcast to the wider aggregated market, lessened a serious effect on local advertising predicted by O'Regan:

The component of local advertising will be transformed by the development of a more centralised, less clearly identified, regional market. . . .As too many viewers who cannot purchase your product are being reached this situation is favouring the development of state wide chains [of car yards, delicatessens and real estate groups] and in the process hastening the integration of those regional markets into national advertising networks. [1987, 7]

After initially opposing aggregation, WIN Television embraced the policy and the opportunity to move into the lucrative ACT market. The day after the deadline which determined whether stations would aggregate or provide MCS, the company's General Manager, John Rushton, said:

We will be installing new transmitters in Canberra, Wagga, Dubbo and Orange. Now this is going to give us a significant increase in our potential audience, because this whole area of southern New South Wales has in excess of one million viewers, but of course it will also introduce the element of competition. [WIN news, 23/9/87]

In 1988, after a license renewal hearing, Rushton told WIN News that WIN-TV was now looking forward to rapid expansion into Canberra and other major centres in southern New South Wales. [WIN news, 17/2/88]

Network affiliations

As discussed earlier, before aggregation regional stations had been able to choose programs from all commercial networks, a process the ABT described as “cherry picking”. WIN, for example, was promoted as “Top 40 Television”, able to take the most popular shows from all metropolitan channels. While it provided its own local news service, its national news was taken from various sources over the years. At one stage, the station showed Channel 7 news during the week, and Channel 10 on weekends.

Under aggregation, regional stations became aligned with a metropolitan network to carry exclusively that station’s programs to the approved market, supplemented by local commercials, local news and some other regional programming. As the commencement dates approached most regional stations formalised network agreements with one metropolitan operator. According to the Tribunal, in a number of cases there was “a degree of common ownership.” [ABT 1988, 8] However, in O’Regan’s view, aggregation attacked the integrity of the highly protected regional stations, forcing them into partnerships with the networks and:

. . .ineluctably leading to a greater reliance upon satellite originated images on their part. [1987, 4]

The need for network affiliation brought a certain amount of jostling for position, given the Nine network’s stronghold at the time. In Market C, WIN made much of the fact that it had secured alignment with TCN, Rushton saying:

We have chosen to become an affiliate of the Nine network, so we’ve been slowly, each week, taking more and more direct programming from the Nine network. As of March 31 [1989] we’ll be almost totally a Nine network affiliate. Our local news, our local children’s programs, our local commercials and the various reports we have like Police Update, the Performing Arts Update and things like that will continue, but for the major programming, the entertainment side of it, that will be coming from the Nine network. [WIN news, 27/2/89]

The former News Director at Capital [CTC] in Canberra, Ken Begg, recalled that the Nine network cut its ties with Capital very dramatically one afternoon at about 4.30, as

the Canberra station was preparing for that night's integrated news bulletin using stories from Nine.

They rang the station to say "you don't have us any more". And that was a real scramble to get a bulletin to air. They denied us access as of 4.30 that afternoon. They play hard ball. [Begg 1996, 1]

In 1988, the ABT recorded network affiliations as follows:

Approved Market A

Network 7; SEQ, MVQ

Network 9; FNQ/TNQ

Network 10; DDQ/SDQ, RTQ

Approved Market B

Network 7; NEN/ECN

Network 9; NBN

Network 10; RTN/NRN

Approved Market C

Network 7; RVN, CBN/CWN (operating as Prime)

Network 9; WIN

Network 10; CTC (Capital)

Approved Market D

Network 7; AMV

Network 9; not finalised

Network 10; not finalised

The Tribunal did sound a warning note in its 1988-89 Annual Report about the effect of network affiliations on localism:

The Broadcasting Act does not make provision for networks or for the possible consequences of networking of programs. The effect of aggregation on localism and what constitutes an adequate and comprehensive service is of concern to the Tribunal, since the amount of local programming on regional services, which the policy is aimed to encourage, appear to be under considerable commercial pressure. [ABT 1988-89, 8]

Despite the many issues arising in the planning for aggregation, implementation of the policy generally happened on time, and in some cases up to a year ahead of schedule. Operators could see the advantage of seizing the moment, once the decisions had been made. Knowles found there was a perception that aggregation would build up very slowly, but in reality that was not acceptable to the public. An added incentive for an early start, from the government's point of view, was that Canberra-based Capital, which

was showing various Nine network programs such as *Sixty Minutes*, changed to a Ten network format in preparation for aggregation. That meant that in the lead-up to the implementation of the policy, politicians in Canberra did not have access to those programs.

That was a nice strategy as far as WIN were concerned. They were quite happy to come in and say “well here we are with all your old programs back again”. [Knowles 1996, 1]

Approved Market C - Southern New South Wales [Map 1]

The Senate Select Committee acknowledged that licensees in Approved Market C objected to being used as “guinea pigs” when it came to aggregation. [Senate Select Committee 1987, 135] However, the availability of equipment meant it was necessary to stagger the implementation dates for the policy, and someone had to go first. Arrangements in Market C had been further complicated by WIN Television’s need to move off its traditional Channel 4, because of government plans to clear Band Two, the traditional FM radio band. Channel 4, translated from a site at Knights Hill on the Illawarra escarpment, was in the centre of Band Two, while the alternative Channel 3, translated from North Wollongong, spanned Bands One and Two.

In the early ‘80s the company had been locked in negotiations with the government to try to secure a replacement frequency which would cause minimum disruption for viewers. Negotiations continued after the change of government and the advent of the equalisation policy. While WIN had initially opposed aggregation, it quickly realised that if it had to go to Ultra High Frequency [UHF], it was better off getting the two new players into the viewing area. According to Rushton, the station was able to stall the government on the issue, until the decision was reached that under aggregation, all stations would broadcast on UHF. That meant that when Prime and Capital began broadcasting into the newly aggregated market in 1989, WIN would be simulcasting on both UHF and Very High Frequency [VHF], and had permission to continue doing so for more than two years, allowing a long phase-in time for viewers to become used to the idea.

Officers from the Department of Transport and Communications began an extensive public awareness campaign in regional areas, to explain the need for the changeover to UHF. People buying new television sets were urged to make sure they were capable of picking up UHF. Individual stations offered information hotlines to help allay confusion and concern.

In mid 1988, WIN began broadcasting on UHF Channel 59 to the area covered by Channel 4 from Knights Hill. The company said that the installation of a new transmitter was part of a \$2.2 million investment to accommodate the new technology. Programs continued to be simulcast on Channel 3 at Eden, Channel 6 Bega, Channel 3 Narooma, and Channel 11 Batemans Bay, and there would be no immediate effect on Channel 3 at North Wollongong.

The company's broadcast on UHF was heralded by a "switching over" ceremony, with the Member for Cunningham, Stewart West, representing Communications Minister Gareth Evans. West told the gathering:

WIN TV's move to UHF will lead the way for people in eastern regional Australia to receive most of their television on the Ultra High Frequency. In fact, in five years, UHF will be regarded as nothing out of the ordinary. In 1989, Wollongong will have five local TV stations, under the government's equalisation program, that is, WIN TV, SBS, ABC and two additional stations, CTC Canberra on UHF 62, and CBN Orange on Channel 65. [WIN news, 16/5/88]

Market C experienced other controversies before aggregation finally began on March 31, 1989. Capital in Canberra took legal action over the start-up date, arguing that it was not ready, and that implementation of aggregation on March 31 would threaten a smooth transition to full aggregation. The other stations were displaying more confidence. In August 1988, Rushton told WIN news:

This initiative by the government is allowing all of our viewers to finally get a choice of three commercial services, that being programs originated by the Seven, Nine and Ten networks, and it also allows us to expand out into the rest of southern New South Wales which is of course quite a large challenge for this company. [WIN news, 25/8/88]

Rushton said that WIN had invested \$6 million in anticipation of aggregation, and he was confident the Department of Communications would ensure reception problems experienced in the conversion from VHF to UHF were resolved before full implementation of aggregation. Just days before the start-up date he told the media:

We've operated in a competitive environment in Wollongong since the first days that we went to air, because the Sydney channels have gotten into Wollongong. We've had to compete with them for viewers ever since the first days, and we think that we're now starting to do that pretty well.
[WIN news, 27/2/89]

The decision was made to implement aggregation in the Wollongong and Canberra areas of Market C on 31 March 1989 as planned. Equalisation would take effect in Wagga Wagga and Orange/Dubbo on 31 December of that year. WIN concentrated its energies on the Canberra market, establishing a station in the suburb of Kingston, and gearing up to present a half hour of local Canberra news each week night, the same formula already successful in Wollongong. Prime, in turn, established facilities in both Wollongong and Canberra, and Capital set up a Wollongong sales office.

At midnight on March 30, the era of aggregation in Australia began. Canberra viewers who tuned in to the new WIN station heard an announcement; "This is WIN Television, a member of the Nine network", followed by a live outside broadcast of the show, *MTV*, then a live broadcast of the *Today* show, seen for the first time by ACT viewers. The event was given much in-house coverage by WIN on its local news bulletins in both Wollongong and Canberra, with the journalist saying, "The launch is the culmination of months of work, and the expenditure of millions of dollars, duplicating facilities and staff in Canberra." The owner of WIN Television, Bruce Gordon, was shown touring the new Canberra studios with the then Prime Minister, Bob Hawke. Gordon said that WIN had just built the biggest independently owned microwave link system in Australia, and it might even rank as one of the world's biggest because of the size of Australia. WIN now had microwave links from Wollongong and Sydney to Canberra, and:

. . . as we continue to aggregate into Orange, Wagga and Dubbo. we'll be extending our microwave link system into all those towns as we build TV stations there. [WIN news, 31/3/89]

Hawke was content to stress the audience impact rather than technology:

I welcome WIN as one of those who are going to make this system work for the benefit of viewers. You are now going to have the same range of choice as people in the capital cities. That's as it should be. [WIN news, 31/3/89]

By January 1990, WIN Television had begun broadcasting into the third segment of Market C, the west of New South Wales. Viewers in the west saw the same programs as TCN viewers in Sydney, with some local commercials. The market was not considered to be lucrative enough to justify expenditure on a local news service at that stage, Gordon pointing out:

It's a major move for a small television station, to be honest, having built studios in Canberra and opened at the end of March, now moving into Orange, Wagga and Dubbo. We probably will have spent well over \$20 million in facilities, with transmitters, microwave links. . . [WIN news, 1/1/90]

WIN's microwave link system between TCN in Sydney, Wollongong, Canberra and the west was by now the biggest in Australia, covering an area larger than Europe.

Even in that early stage of aggregation, renewed concern had been raised about the policy's viability, with some regional stations worried that the capital city-based networks were not carrying a fair share of the financial burden. The burden was indeed substantial. WIN initially predicted aggregation would cost \$12 million to set up. Rushton compared the aggregated Market C with the viewing area of Adelaide. Both had a potential audience of about one million people, yet delivery of three commercial services to these markets required:

MARKET C (as at March 1989)

18 transmitters
105 translators
7 major studio complexes
6 local news bulletins
12 direct sales forces
10 commercial feeds
3 microwave link
installations

ADELAIDE

3 transmitters
3 translators
3 major studios
3 news bulletins
3 sales forces
3 commercial feeds
nil - off air
[Rushton 1991]

Rayner put the claim in perspective:

The fact that Adelaide's one million people all live in the one place, within easy reach of a transmitter and a translator, was overlooked. The fact that populations are spread across whole States is a mere by-the-way; that many will languish beyond the reach of the UHF signals proposed is a convenient though politically dangerous question to be left to the future. [ABT 1987, 51]

To offset the massive expenditure, the government announced a package of sales tax exemptions and licence fee rebates for regional operators. On 25 January 1990, regulations under the *Television Licence Fees Act* were gazetted, providing for a rebate of licence fees for regional commercial television operators, when they moved into aggregation. A 100 per cent rebate was available to eligible licensees in the first year of aggregation in their area, with rebates declining to 75 per cent, 50 per cent and 25 per cent respectively in the following three years. In its annual report of 1991-92, the ABT explained the purpose of the rebate:

[It] is to provide financial assistance to licensees at the time that they are required to make large investments of capital. The tapering of the rebates is intended to encourage affected licensees to begin their aggregation implementation as soon as possible. [ABT 1991-2, 85]

Later, additional rebate schemes were introduced, and operators were offered a waiver of rental on Commonwealth owned transmitter sites.

Gordon remained confident the massive investment undertaken by his company was secure, but at the same time he reminded people that WIN was not a charity:

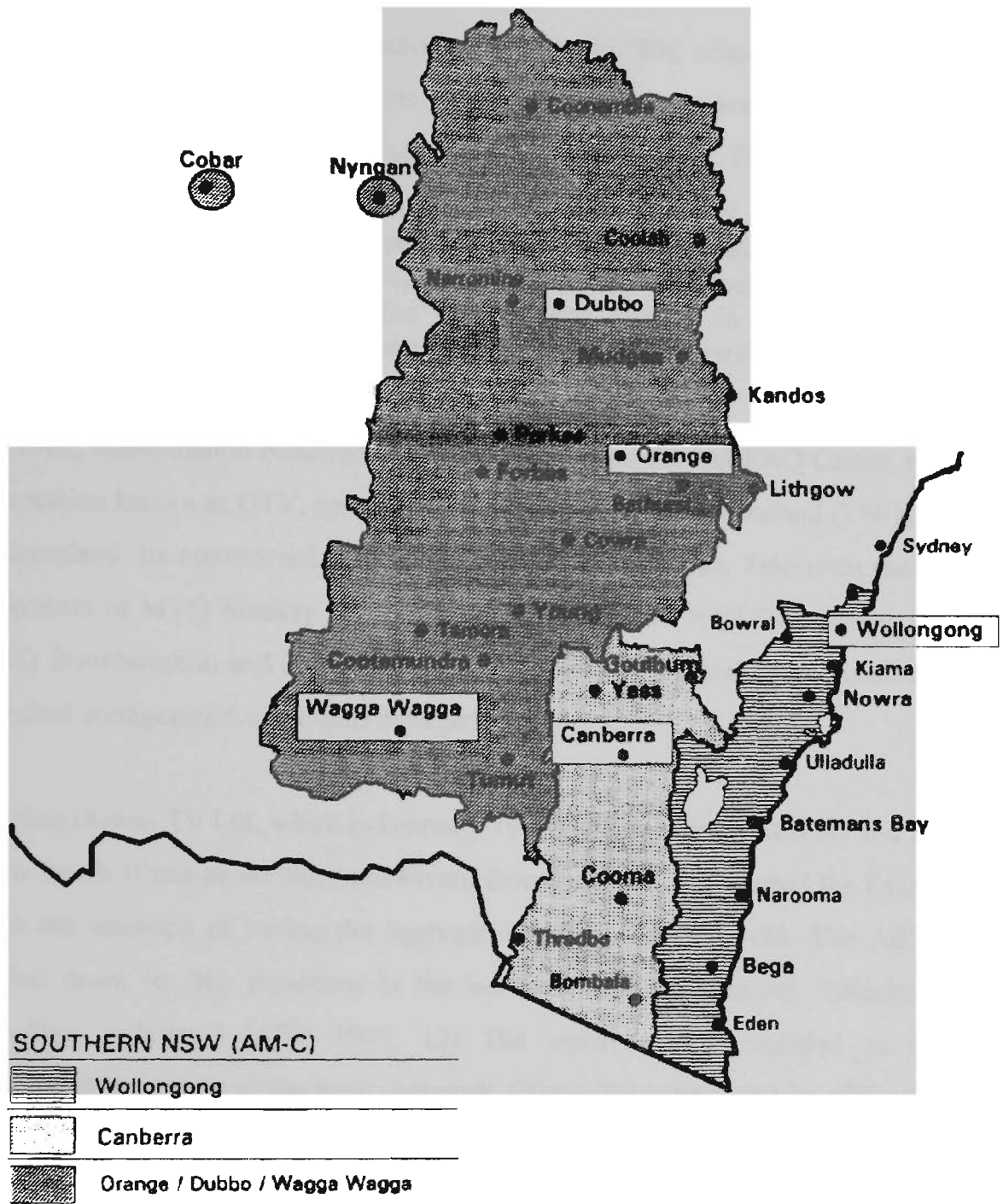
I'm very optimistic that it will work. The only problem in it is that private television in Australia is paid for with advertising dollars, and we need the advertisers' support and the viewers' support to buy those consumer goods from our sponsors in order to make our television pay, because we're not government sponsored and we don't have a license fee in Australia like they do in England and other places, so television is really free. [WIN news, 1/1/90]

Another important development in Approved Market C concerned the relationship between Capital in Canberra and its metropolitan affiliate, Network Ten. Ten was reported to be "locked in discussions to buy out Sydney businessman Mr Charles

Curran's stake in Capital Television in a move which would greatly enhance the network's plans for a \$900million-plus float." [*SMH* 25/10/95, 4]

Ownership of Capital would have given Ten licensees in Perth and Adelaide, and created a national network rivalling Seven in size. Earlier, Network Ten had engaged in a legal battle with Curran, attempting to sever program supply to his three stations after allegations that Capital had been paying less than it should for programming. Ten claimed that Capital should have paid \$6.9 million in program supply fees in 1991-92 instead of the \$1.8 million it actually paid, and \$11 million rather than \$4.9 million in 1992-93. The New South Wales Supreme Court ruled that a programming contract between the two companies should stand, and there were no grounds for Capital to have to make back payments. Capital had also sued Ten and its main shareholder, CanWest, over their purchase of the northern New South Wales regional station NRTV, which Capital had wanted to buy.

After prolonged media speculation surrounding the Capital-Ten relationship, it was the Victorian-based Southern Cross Broadcasting which purchased Capital in Canberra, for \$40 million. The *SMH* reported that Southern Cross Chairman Peter Nixon told shareholders: "restructuring of Ten Capital after acquisition had resulted in a significant improvement in operating margins and with further cost efficiencies being targeted."



Map 1: Viewing areas in Approved Market C – Southern New South Wales

Approved Market A - Queensland [Map 2]

When aggregation was being considered in the mid '80s, some commentators believed the Queensland regional markets had an economic advantage. In their report commissioned by the Forward Development Unit of the DOC, Dick and Associates said:

The Queensland regional market benefits from a higher advertising dollar return per capita of population than any other state - partly as a consequence of a high disposable income element, and partly because regional Queensland is the only regional market in Australia which contains a larger population than its relevant State capital city. [DOC Part 2 1985, 127]

In 1989, consolidation occurred between TNQ Townsville and FNQ Cairns, resulting in the station known as QTV, operated by Telecasters North Queensland (TNQ), later Ten Queensland. Its commercial competitors were to be Sunshine Television (later Seven), operators of MVQ Mackay and SEQ Maryborough, and WIN Queensland, owners of RTQ Rockhampton and DDQ Toowoomba. However, several events occurred before the final configuration of stations emerged.

Darling Downs TV Ltd, which in February 1990 was the licensee of RTQ and DDQ, and New South Wales-based Northern Rivers Television Ltd, approached the Federal Court with the intention of having the aggregation policy declared void. The ABT put the action down to "the downturn in the economy and the financial difficulties of the television industry." [ABT 1991, 13] The orders sought included an injunction restraining the owner of the Seven network, Qintex Television, and its affiliated stations from putting into effect aggregation agreements, and an injunction restraining the ABT from renewing Channel 7's licences in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane, and from giving consent to the Qintex affiliates to allow Qintex to participate in the benefits of their licences. The Tribunal's Annual Report of 1989-90 said:

The Minister, Qintex and Prime filed motions to strike out the proceedings. The Court (Hill J.) dismissed these motions. . .and set a timetable to bring the matter to trial. [ABT 1989-90, 129]

According to the stations, agreements for the supply of programs from the metropolitan networks to their regional affiliates meant that the networks were over the 60 per cent

limit for audience reach. The ABT cited as an example that before aggregation in Southern New South Wales, the Seven network reached 66.76 per cent of the total population through its Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide, Perth, Mackay and Maryborough outlets, and was in the process of reducing its reach to below the limit, at the Tribunal's behest. Due to Seven's affiliate agreement with Prime in southern New South Wales, an area containing 6.76 per cent of the Australian population, it was claimed that aggregation would give Seven a total population reach of 73.52 per cent. Ralph Willis, then Minister for Transport and Communications, announced that the government would move to make program supply agreements exempt from calculation of the audience limit. Later that year the government made it known that it would appoint an independent consultant to look at the concerns of regional operators facing aggregation. However, the two stations then announced they had dropped their court action.

The final days leading up to the start of aggregation in Queensland, 31 December 1990, were dramatic. It had been assumed that under aggregation, TNQ would take programming from the Nine network, while MVQ and SEQ would take Seven's product, and RTQ and DDQ would show Ten programs. However, on Christmas Eve, 1990, Gordon's TWT Holdings, owner of WIN Television and now licensee of RTQ, announced it had bought DDQ: "We thought it was good to have an area bigger than the state of Texas, and try to make aggregation work," Gordon said at the time. [WIN news, 27/12/90] It was also discovered that TNQ's affiliation arrangement with the Nine network had not been formalised in writing. TWT acted quickly to change its Queensland stations to Nine network affiliates, while still keeping RTQ's existing marketing name, "Star Television". Then, on December 26, the decision was made to market the entire regional network as WIN. By then, all the promotional material and letterheads had been printed. Rushton recalled a printer having to come in on the public holiday and change everything, then have the stationery couriered to Queensland in time for the start of aggregation. Gordon summarised the advent of aggregation in bullish fashion:

The fact that we're within a week of going on the air in Queensland in aggregation and the fact we've been able to make these changes so close to the deadline, shows you that nothing is written in stone - anything can happen. The next area to aggregate in Australia is northern New South Wales, and we're certainly taking a hard look at that. [WIN news, 27/12/90]

Not surprisingly, Telecasters North Queensland was less than impressed at having the top-rating network stolen from under its nose. According to the ABT's 1991 review of the industry, TNQ had been negotiating its arrangements for affiliation with the Nine network since October 1987. The Tribunal said TNQ's Chairman, Jack Gleeson, was "disappointed and surprised at Nine's decision, particularly as it left the company only two business days to find programs to telecast." With time quickly running out, TNQ reached an affiliation agreement with the Ten network on 27 December, 1990.

There were more dramatic developments in Approved Market A after aggregation, with the takeover of Sunshine Television in late 1995. Seven had been suggested as a potential bidder for Sunshine, which it could buy without breaching audience-reach regulations. At the same time, it was suggested in the media that Prime was a contender to buy the Queensland regional network. In the *SMH*'s assessment, Paul Ramsay's Prime Television was the obvious candidate to buy Sunshine, providing "the last piece in the regional Seven affiliate jigsaw puzzle along the east coast". [*SMH* 16/6/95, 29] Prime and Sunshine had reportedly held merger talks on a number of occasions, but had preferred to continue as separate entities. Previously, Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation Ltd had increased its stake in Sunshine, blocking an earlier \$89 million takeover bid by the company's largest shareholder, Grundy Investments, and perplexing the market. There was speculation that News Corporation had larger things in mind, for example:

. . . News was seeking to cement some influence at each of Seven's regional affiliates in the event cross media rules might be relaxed, clearing the way for Mr Murdoch to take control of the network. [*SMH* 15/7/95, 33]

In October 1995, Seven made a \$107 million takeover bid for Sunshine. To many people's surprise, Prime was revealed as the buyer of a 1.3 per cent stake in the company, above the Seven offer price. There was talk that Prime would make a counter bid, but observers questioned whether Prime could afford it:

Prime, which carries the Seven signal in regional NSW and Victoria, has been gradually paying down a crippling debt burden incurred during the late 1980s when it went on a buying spree of regional TV stations at inflated prices. [*SMH* 3/10/95, 40]

A successful purchase of Sunshine would give Prime control of the regional television market on the east coast of Australia, and would enable it to retain the joint advertising sales system it shared with Sunshine. However, as the *SMH* pointed out, by becoming the "fly in the ointment", Prime ran the risk of putting Seven offside, and promoting ill-feeling between itself and its program supplier. [*SMH* 3/10/95, 40] Seven lifted its takeover offer, and Prime increased its stake in Sunshine to 14.9 per cent, lodging an application with the ABA to further increase its share holding over the limit laid down by cross-media ownership rules. There was renewed speculation that Prime could not afford to make a counter offer, but was in fact trying to establish itself in a strong position to influence negotiations over the future supply of Seven programs. It was suggested that Prime was seeking a compromise which could involve a joint regional Seven affiliate structure:

. . . possibly including the West Australian Golden West network owned by Mr Kerry Stokes - who is also a Seven director and major shareholder. [*SMH* 17/10/95, 33]

Prime increased its share holding to 18 per cent, and then to 19.9 per cent, while still awaiting an ABA ruling on the cross-media ownership issue which had arisen because Sunshine owned radio stations in Prime's viewing area. While the move placed the company in an even stronger negotiating position with Seven, "there were suggestions. . . that Seven management has been angered by Prime's attempt to thwart its bid." [*SMH*, 18/10/95] *The Australian* reported that Seven's managing director, Mr Gary Rice, reiterated that Prime's recent buying had "strained the relationship" between the two companies. [*Australian* 18/10/95, 39]

By late October, Seven had sealed control of Sunshine, boosting its share holding to more than 50 per cent. While that ended any hope Prime might have had to launch a counter-bid, there was continued speculation that Prime's main motivation was to use its stake as a lever in negotiations, as the *SMH* pointed out:

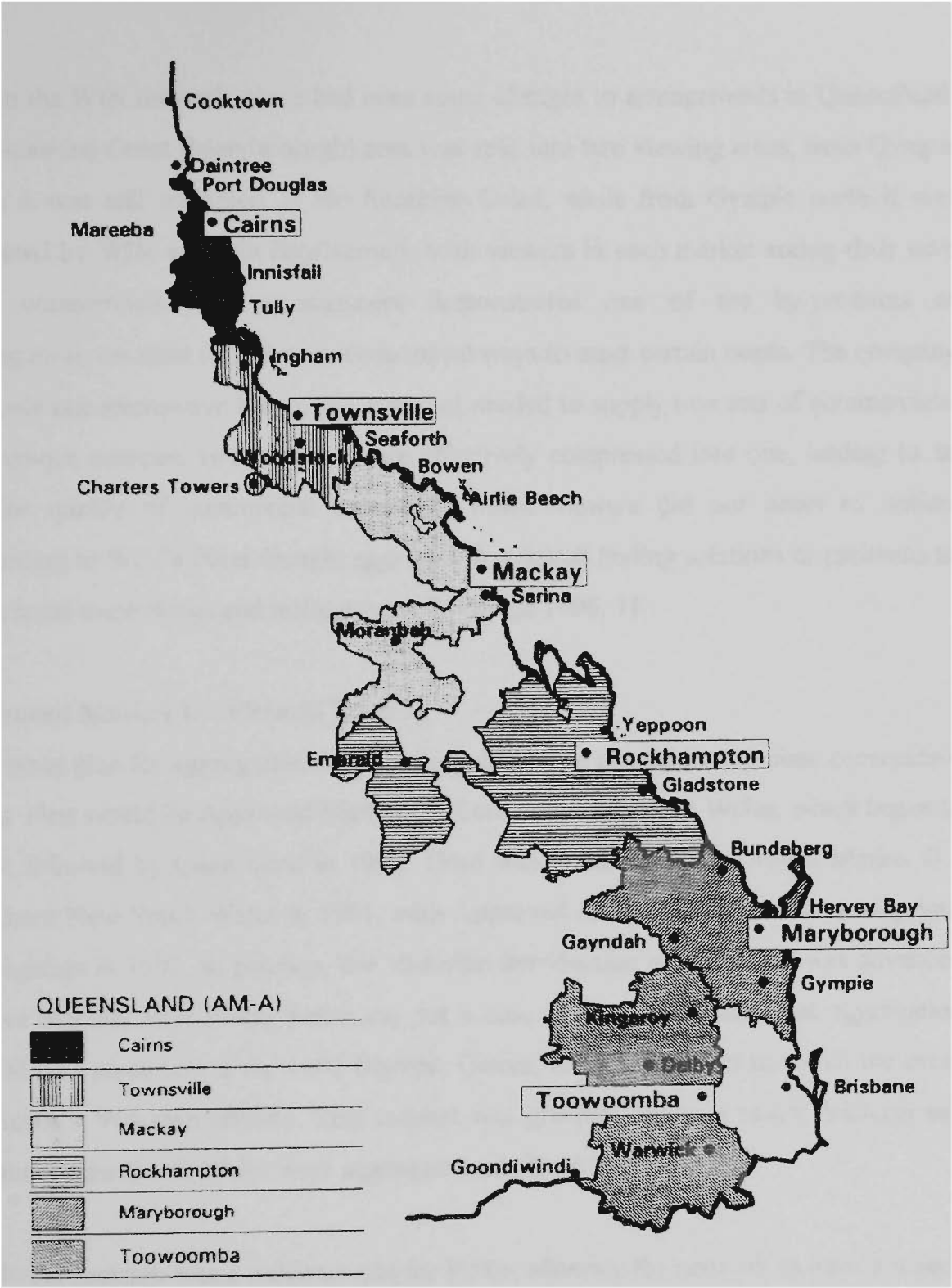
Although Prime's affiliation agreement with Seven does not expire until 1999, it has been suggested the company may seek to renegotiate now in order to secure its future. [21/10/95, 38]

However, Rice said Prime executives were "kidding themselves" if they thought their stake in Sunshine could be used as a bargaining chip. He said he did "not see how they could even contemplate" using the share holding for leverage in future negotiations with Seven. [*Daily Telegraph*, Sydney, 21/10/95, 137]

Within a month, Prime sold its interest in Sunshine to Seven, accepting an offer after discussions between Paul Ramsay and Kerry Stokes. According to the *SMH* "most observers believe the move has guaranteed Prime some concessions from Seven." [18/11/95] The company also moved to reassure its shareholders that its relationship with its metropolitan affiliate had never been stronger. "I don't think our activities at Sunshine have affected our relationship with Seven at all," Prime's Chief Executive, George Brown, told the annual meeting. [*Daily Telegraph*, 18/11/95]

By 1996, each network in Queensland had expanded to the extent that they covered the areas which they were required to reach under their implementation plans. WIN and Sunshine operated seven strategic viewing areas in Queensland, while Ten operated six. All viewers in regional Queensland were receiving three commercial channels, with viewing areas based around the towns of Cairns, Townsville, Mackay, Rockhampton, Maryborough and Toowoomba, with a combined viewing audience of 452,000 homes and 1,332,000 people. [*B & T Weekly* 22/3/96, 22] Major developments in the market were summarised as follows:

Sunshine TV became Seven Queensland (end of January) and at the same time QTV became Ten Queensland: Seven Queensland eclipsed Channel Nine in ratings for the first time at the beginning of the year; WIN TV's local news share continues to grow. [*B & T Weekly* 19/4/96, 33]



Map 2: Viewing areas in Approved Market A – Queensland

Within the WIN network, there had been some changes to arrangements in Queensland. The Sunshine Coast (Maryborough) area was split into two viewing areas; from Gympie south it was still marketed as the Sunshine Coast, while from Gympie north it was marketed by WIN as Wide Bay/Burnett, with viewers in each market seeing their own local commercials. The arrangement demonstrated one of the by-products of aggregation; the need to find new, economical ways to meet certain needs. The company had only one microwave link to the area, but needed to supply two sets of commercials. In a unique exercise, two pictures were effectively compressed into one, leading to an inferior quality of commercial broadcast, which viewers did not seem to notice. According to WIN's Peter Gough, aggregation required finding solutions to problems to "overcome these things and make it work." [Gough 1996, 1]

Approved Market D - Victoria [Map 3]

The initial plan for aggregation was for the policy to be phased in over four consecutive years. First would be Approved Market C - Southern New South Wales, which began in 1989, followed by Queensland in 1990. Third was to have been Approved Market B - Northern New South Wales in 1991, with Approved Market D - Victoria moving into aggregation in 1992. In practice, the Victorian introduction of the policy was advanced twelve months, after Prime Television put a case to the government that aggregation should take place before the 1992 Olympic Games, enabling viewers to watch the event on Seven's Victorian affiliate. That request was granted, and as a result, Victoria and Northern New South Wales were aggregated simultaneously.

While the decision was a welcome one for Prime, allowing the network to have a unique launching platform in Victoria, it did cause problems in the wider scheme of things. Gough recalled:

It created huge problems for major transmitter suppliers who ordinarily sell a certain number of pieces worldwide, to suddenly find they had all these pieces for northern New South Wales and Victoria to be delivered effectively concurrently. All the heavy hardware was a real struggle. [Gough 1996, 2]

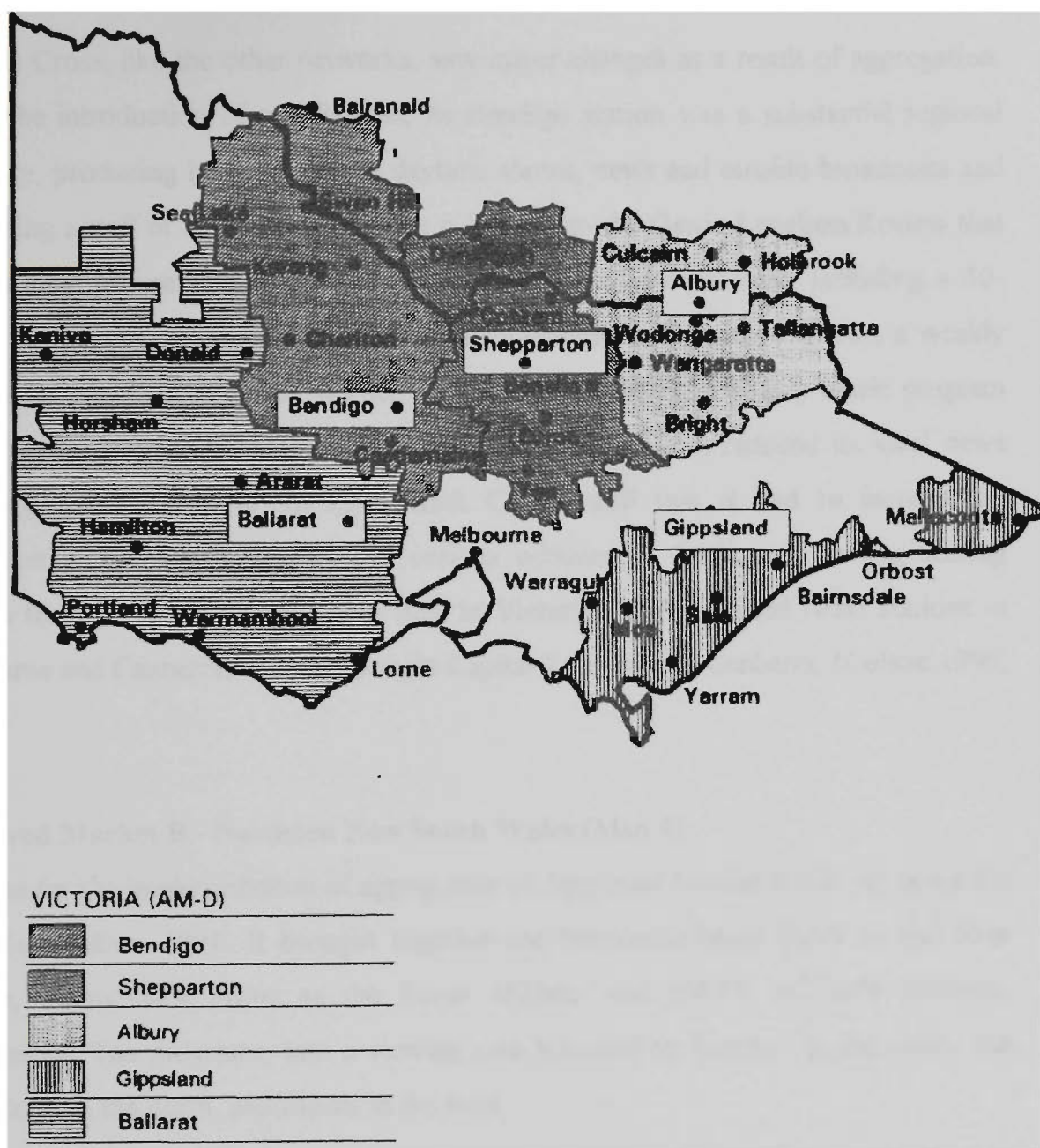
Before aggregation in Victoria, Prime operated AMV at Albury and showed mainly Seven programs, while Southern Cross covered approximately half the state through BCV Bendigo and GLV La Trobe Valley. The ENT-owned VIC-TV broadcast predominantly Nine programs to Ballarat and Shepparton, and STV Mildura was on relay from VIC-TV. Mildura was to remain outside the aggregation system as a solus station, while the viewing areas of the other three companies would combine to form the new aggregated market for regional Victoria.

The Seven and Ten affiliates continued to operate as Prime and Southern Cross respectively, although Southern Cross used the promotional name Ten Victoria for ease of operations with its metropolitan network. In September 1994, the Nine affiliate, ENT, was purchased by WIN Television. The move made WIN the biggest regional operator in Australia, taking in VIC-TV in Victoria, as well as ENT's Tas TV in Hobart. According to Gordon:

We had a lot of opposition from the directors of that company, who naturally didn't want the New South Welshmen coming down into their area. But we felt that our bid was very fair and very well balanced and calculated to be based on the actual correct income of the company. Nobody could afford to pay any more than we were paying at the moment. [Gordon 1994, 2]

The *SMH* reported the takeover, describing the victory in the “sometimes acrimonious” takeover bid as giving Gordon control of all of the East Coast affiliates of associate Kerry Packer's Nine Network Australia except NBN, the northern NSW affiliate. [5/9/94, 31]

By 1995 the Victorian market was loosely divided into five viewing areas; Albury, Shepparton, Bendigo, Ballarat, and the Gippsland area. WIN introduced an additional viewing area by separating Western Victoria from Ballarat, showing the same programs including local news in both areas, but dividing them for commercial purposes. Southern Cross broadcast separate commercials to four areas, combining the Shepparton and Albury viewing areas.



Map 3: Viewing areas in Approved Market D – Victoria

Southern Cross, like the other networks, saw major changes as a result of aggregation. Before the introduction of equalisation, its Bendigo station was a substantial regional monopoly, producing local programs, daytime shows, news and outside broadcasts and maintaining a staff of 120-130. In 1984, it submitted to the Oswin Localism Review that its total local programming content was in the order of 17 per cent, including a 30-minute week-night regional news bulletin, documentaries, religious programs, a weekly political commentary, a weekly women's show, stock reports, a weekly music program and numerous outside broadcasts. [Oswin 1984, 175] While it reduced its local news after aggregation, General Manager Mark Colson said that it had to increase its operations department to handle the various commercial feeds, and its engineering division to cater for 55 transmission sites in Victoria. It also owned radio stations in Melbourne and Canberra, and later bought Capital Television in Canberra. [Colson 1996, 1]

Approved Market B - Northern New South Wales [Map 4]

The date for the implementation of aggregation in Approved Market B was set down for New Year's Eve, 1991. It brought together the Newcastle-based NBN as the Nine affiliate, Tamworth's Prime as the Seven affiliate, and NRTV at Coffs Harbour, broadcasting Ten programs, into a viewing area bounded by Gosford in the south, the Gold Coast in the north, and Moree in the west.

During the debate over changes to regional television, NBN was undergoing a series of ownership changes. The station had begun broadcasting in 1962 and boasted:

The standard of performance established from the commencement of operations justified all expectations of the station's facilities, which from the beginning were planned to ensure the highest of studio, technical and programme standards. [NBN Annual Report 1962]

At the time of its first broadcast, NBN had a largely local share holding, with the biggest portion held by the Lamb family. In 1978, a controlling interest passed to Michael Wansey, and two years later, Wansey sold his stake to the Perth-based Parry Corporation. The Parry group also bought a remaining 23.9 per cent of NBN held by

independent shareholders. In 1979, the company bought NWS 9 Adelaide, and sold it in September 1982. In 1987, the Parry Corporation disposed of its 100 per cent share holding in NBN to Fulcrum Media Ltd, after reportedly seeking “to cut its heavy interest bill and restructure its debts”. [NH 21/8/87, 2] In 1989, the pharmacy company Washington H. Soul Pattinson and Co Ltd bought NBN for \$36 million. [NH 1/11/89, 1]

Throughout the equalisation debate, NBN had been a staunch opponent of aggregation. In 1984, it was reported to have “applied for control of a second supplementary television licence in the Hunter.” [NH 17/3/84] Later, faced with the cost of extending its transmission throughout the aggregated Hunter-Taree and New England-North Coast areas and competition from two rivals, it continued to support the option of multi channel services rather than aggregation. At the same time, Prime operator Ramcorp Ltd, which had purchased NEN 9 Tamworth and ECN 8 Taree, was known to be a supporter of aggregation through its stations in southern New South Wales and Victoria:

Ramcorp’s appearance in the Hunter market. . . could force NBN into immediate aggregation. This is something it has fought against, seeking instead to adopt the MCS path that would allow it to operate three commercial television services in the Hunter until 1996. [NH, 21/8/87]

A *Newcastle Herald* editorial summed up the situation, saying that for 25 years NBN had been the big fish, “indeed the only fish”, in the Hunter Region commercial television pond. It had to compete with ABC and SBS television and cope with a high penetration by Sydney stations, but this was no barrier to it becoming one of Australia’s most profitable television stations. The passing of legislation for aggregation meant a change to that “comfortable situation,” with the areas previously served by NBN, NRN 11 Coffs Harbour, RTN 8 Lismore, NEN 9 Tamworth and ECN 8 Taree amalgamated into one transmission zone with three competing services provided by the three companies that controlled the existing stations. [21/8/87]

Even after the policy was introduced in the pilot area of southern New South Wales, NBN continued to oppose it, and was “considering legal challenges to aggregation.” [NH, 22/12/89] The company joined a number of other regional operators, including the

Lismore/Coffs Harbour licensee, in urging the government to halt aggregation and adopt the MCS option. NBN's Chief Executive, Joe Sweeney, said he was convinced that aggregation "would not work." [NH 22/12/89, 1]

Like WIN in Wollongong, NBN was also concerned at the prospect of having to move onto UHF, "a move the management believes is disadvantageous." [NH, 28/11/89] The company's Chairman, Jim Millner, said he hoped NBN would continue to broadcast on VHF, but took a more positive view of aggregation:

In fact it may even help us because we will have a number of Channel Nine programs and our carrying area will extend up into Coffs Harbour.
[NH, 28/11/89]

In early discussions about aggregation NRTV had supported the policy, but former employee Michael O'Grady believed that was because the company did not realise that NBN would be part of the equation, and that the largest viewing area, Newcastle, would become the focus of the market. [O'Grady 1996, 1] Like NBN, the station had gone through a number of changes in its history, starting as NRN with a main station on the far north coast, then moving to a Coffs Harbour base with a station at Lismore, as NRN 11 and RTN 8. At one stage, the Northern Rivers Network was part of the Great Eastland Network, a network of programming and commercial convenience rather than common ownership. However, at the time of aggregation, the station, known by then as NRTV, was a strong incumbent at Coffs Harbour. O'Grady said NRTV initially believed that the Newcastle viewing area, in a way, would be an entity by itself:

...because they were big enough to run as an entity, but Coffs was going to go more or less further up the coast and wider west, but not so far south, with Coffs still the centre of the action. [O'Grady 1996, 1]

The respective network affiliations between NBN and Nine and Prime and Seven were already established, so NRTV had little option but to affiliate with Ten, the lowest-rating station of the three. "So they [NRTV] became the incumbent station which was really the first one that was going to suffer." [O'Grady 1996, 1]

The station came under Ten ownership in 1993, after the regionals had weathered the first torrid years under the new policy:

The first hint of a renewed corporate activity came late last year with the decision by TNQ to join with fellow Ten network shareholders. . . in the acquisition of the Coffs Harbour-based Northern Rivers Television (NRTV). [*SMH* 5/9/94, 21]

It then broadcast purely Ten content, except for local commercials:

With the date for implementation in northern New South Wales moving closer, NBN moved into fully competitive mode, announcing that it would be the only one of the three commercial stations broadcasting in the Hunter region to screen programs 24 hours a day. With days to go before the change, the company's station manager, Denis Ledbury, said NBN had spent the previous two years preparing for aggregation, with the cost of extending the transmission system throughout northern New South Wales and the installation of technology to split programs and commercials to different parts of the market exceeding \$17 million. Similarly, Prime said it had spent approximately \$15 million to extend its services throughout the market, and NRTV had outlaid about \$11 million on its entry into the expanded viewing area. [*NH TV and Video Extra*, 27/12/91 - 2/2/92, 1]

NRTV had marketed itself as "Television action!", "Television that tells it as it is!" and "Television that'll bring tears to your eyes". It maintained that localism would not be affected by its expansion from its monopoly area, bounded by Port Macquarie, the Gold Coast and Tenterfield, to the new market area even though its potential audience would grow from 570,000 to more than 1.4 million:

By splitting its broadcast signal, the station can telecast different programs and commercials to six different regions, Coffs Harbour, Lismore, the Gold Coast, Newcastle, Taree-Manning and Tamworth-Armidale. [*NH* 30/12/91, 5]

NRTV began broadcasting into the aggregated market at one second past midnight on 31 December 1991, with a two-minute pre-recorded welcoming address by its managing

director. Prime began broadcasting to most of Newcastle and the Lower Hunter on 1 January 1992:

Prime's arrival means the Lower Hunter finally has the three commercial television stations promised under the Federal Government's Television Equalisation Program. NRTV debuted yesterday. [NH 1/1/92, 4]

However, some parts of Newcastle, including the suburbs of Kotara and Merewether, experienced a delay in receiving both NRTV and Prime, due to poor weather and technical difficulties. The *Newcastle Herald* reported that the last-minute delay to NRTV's debut in the suburbs was likely to frustrate variety-hungry viewers in the two areas, "which will be without the Prime programs until April." [NH 31/12/91, 3]

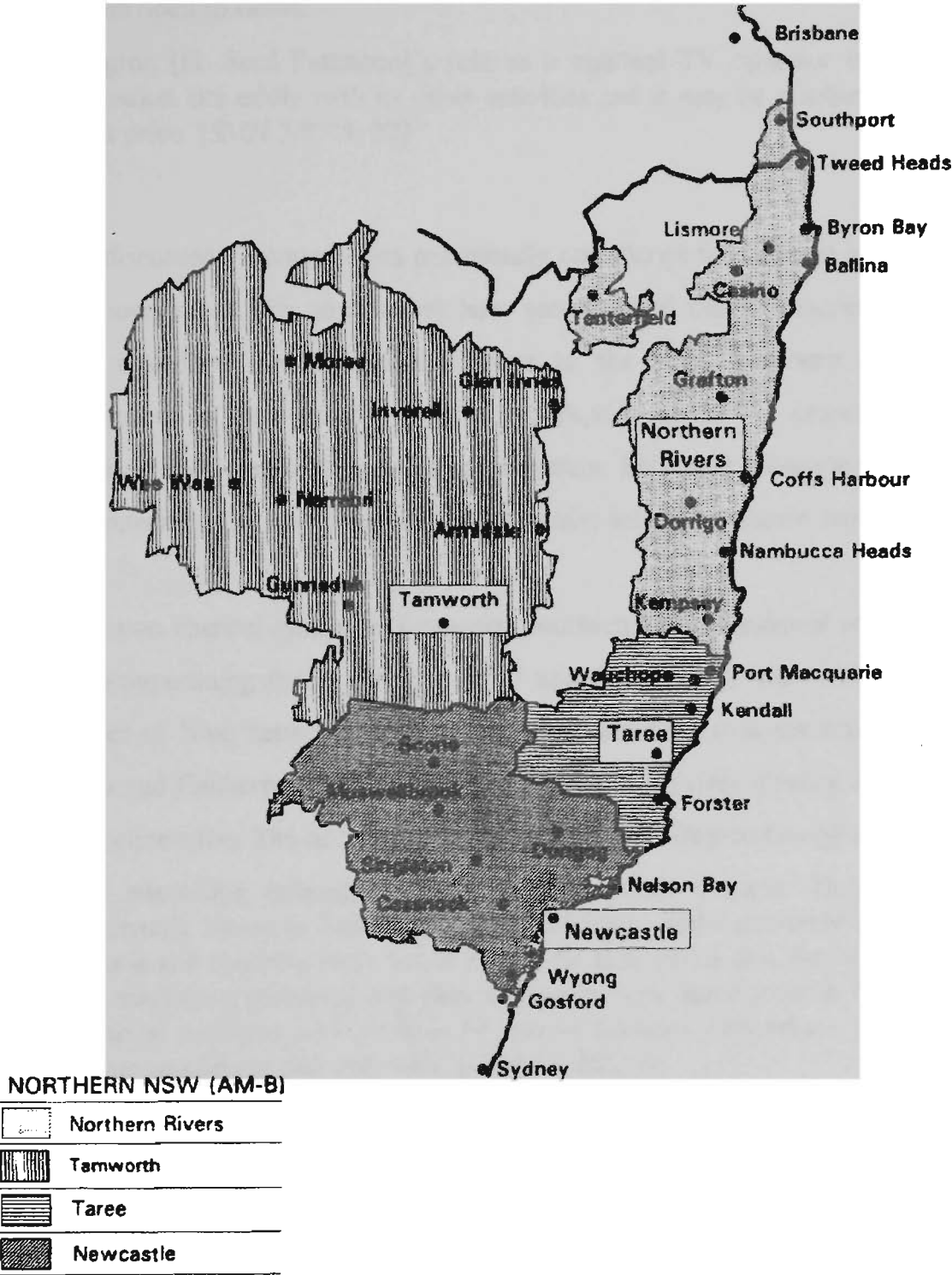
The early days of aggregation in Approved Market B led to a price-cutting war as the three stations battled to win advertisers. NBN was reported to be confident of keeping its traditional base in the Hunter, and Prime said it had not yet suffered any ill effects from having two new stations vying for the advertising dollar in its traditional areas. [NH 8/1/92, 4]

Despite the early concerns about financial viability, by the mid-1990s all three stations were continuing to broadcast into the aggregated market. NBN boasted that it was "Australia's highest rating television station in 1995", attracting 36.3 per cent of the audience in northern New South Wales. [advertisement, *B & T Weekly* 22/3/96, 25] A 1996 report on the Hunter region outlined the configuration:

The Hunter region is currently serviced by five television stations, namely NBN (an affiliate of the Nine network) Prime (affiliated with the Seven network) Ten (which is known as Channel Ten Hunter) the ABC and SBS. Of these, only NBN and Prime TV offer local news services in the Hunter region. [*Newcastle and the Hunter Region* 96/97, 6]

With NBN's position looking strong, there was speculation that NBN would come under the ownership of Bruce Gordon, who by 1997 owned the Nine affiliate in every aggregated market except northern New South Wales. Observers predicted that the

Map 4: Viewing areas in Approved Market B – Northern New South Wales



pharmacy company Washington H. Soul Pattinson which owned the Newcastle-based station, would be open to offers:

Washington [H. Soul Pattinson]'s role as a regional TV operator in a single market sits oddly with its other activities and it may be a seller at the right price. [*SMH* 5/9/94, 22]

Tasmania

As previously discussed, Tasmania was not initially considered for aggregation because of its smaller population. The government later reconsidered the Tasmanian situation, and chose to introduce one additional licensee to the state. Southern Cross had purchased the station at Launceston from ENT, which also owned the station at Hobart and therefore had to sell one outlet prior to aggregation. ENT was subsequently bought by WIN, thus extending the Southern Cross-WIN rivalry into the southern state.

Because of the two channel system in Tasmania, Southern Cross continued to broadcast a mixture of programming from both Channel 7 and Channel 10, while WIN was the exclusive carrier of Nine network programs. While Southern Cross marketed itself as Ten in Victoria and Canberra, in Tasmania it maintained a separate identity and did not attempt to associate either Ten or Seven with its image. According to Gough of WIN:

It's an interesting strategic thing from their point of view. They're predominantly Seven in Tasmania with a Ten input, and exclusively Ten in Victoria and southern New South Wales. So that means that they have certain marketing problems and they obviously have some trouble with promotional activities and conflicts of interest between networks. . .but they seem to manage that very well. [Gough 1996, 3]

Colson of Southern Cross emphasised that the mixture of Seven and Ten programming in Tasmania was working: "We are the leading station in ratings, which goes against the national trend [of Nine winning the ratings]." He also said Southern Cross was not concerned about the ongoing commercial viability of its Tasmanian station despite the small market, because of the decision to limit aggregation to two players in that state. [Colson 1996, 1]

Solus stations

The four regions in eastern Australia not covered by the Indicative Plan - Mount Isa, Griffith, Mildura and Broken Hill - retained their regional monopolies and remained as solus stations, although the government later looked at additional licenses in the solus markets of Griffith and Mildura, and Darwin.

In 1996 the Mildura station was owned by WIN Television and marketed on air as such, although its programming did contain some product from Channels 7 and 10, to ensure viewers were not disadvantaged by missing out on programs of special significance:

If there were something significant on either Seven or Ten, for example, the Olympic Games, then the Olympics will be carried on that station by WIN, because it can't be carried by anyone else. [Gough 1996, 4]

Gough admitted that such occasions were “a logistical nightmare”, because the feed from the other network had to be taken in at Ballarat, and managed separately from there to get it to the Mildura audience, or alternatively, run locally from Mildura. “We actually have co-ordinators at Mildura, so we can run it locally,” he said. The pattern occurred in reverse at Mount Isa, where the station was owned by the Ten Queensland regional group and showed predominantly Ten programming, with some input from Nine and Seven on special occasions. The solus station at Griffith took programming from WIN.

The Prime network had shown interest in becoming the additional licensee in the Mildura and Griffith markets, mainly because of the commercial advantage in servicing a wider area, rather than the appeal of being watched in those two towns:

The guys [at Prime] that sit in North Sydney and make decisions would recognise that WIN Television covers this and the other two [networks] don't, therefore WIN Television is a better [advertising] buy in this state than the other two because we've got more territory. . .the fact that no-one's up there is irrelevant. [Gough 1996, 5]

Mildura's isolation in television terms had long been a concern to government, with the 1987 Senate Select Committee report recommending that consideration be given to including the region in a future approved market. The Committee said Mildura would best be included in an approved market made up substantially of parts of eastern South

Australia, even though that went against the criteria that approved markets fell within one state and one time zone. [Senate Select Committee 1987, 93-4] The Committee also expressed concern at Griffith's situation as a solus market, recommending that the licensee, MTN 9, be given the option of consolidating the licence with another licensee in one of the new service areas.

In July 1995 the ABA moved to open up competition in the Mildura-Sunraysia market, announcing it would issue one new commercial television licence, two commercial and two community radio licences. According to the Chairman of the Authority, Peter Webb, the ABA would allow the existing Mildura station, STV, to provide an extra service:

. . . only if it is satisfied that no other person is likely to be interested in, and in a position to, operate another commercial TV broadcasting service in that market. [*Weekend Australian*, 15-16/7/95]

Four months later, the Authority announced that the second television licence would be allocated by an auction-style price-based system. Webb said WIN's application to operate a second licence in the market had been rejected after the Authority received expressions of interest from Prime, the Northern Territory-based Imparja, and a third party.

The licence will be allocated to the highest bidder, subject to the price bid being higher than the published reserve price for the licence, and other requirements. [*Weekend Australian*, 4-5/11/95]

The Darwin market also attracted interest, with an alliance led by the former head of Prime, Allan Hoy, and former Liberal Communications Minister, Neil Brown, emerging as a contender for the city's second commercial television licence. Packer, whose Territory Television Pty Ltd held the monopoly station in Darwin, had applied to set up a second station, but the bid was rejected by the ABA, again because of competing expressions of interest. Brown reportedly said:

The outlook for regional free-to-air television is very attractive and the opportunity to develop another network through the allocation of new licences is exciting. [*Daily Telegraph* February 1996, 125]

The incumbent broadcasters in all three solus markets where second licences were under consideration - Territory Television in Darwin, WIN in Mildura and MTN in Griffith - later challenged the ABA's decision to allow second licences, saying the regions were too small to be viable for another operator. They also were reported to have threatened to close their local news services, claiming cost-cutting arising out of reduced revenue would force such a move [*Australian*, 8/10/96]. The stations lodged appeals against the licences with the Administrative Appeals Tribunal, but the ABA subsequently challenged the Tribunal's right to hear the appeals:

Recent changes to the Broadcasting Services Act effectively extinguished the broadcasters' right of appeal against the licence allocations. The AAT therefore did not have the right to hear the cases. [*Australian* 14/2/96, 34]

The ABA pushed ahead with its plan to provide the additional licences, conducting its first-ever licence auction on 29 October 1996, for the Darwin and Mildura markets. The *SMH* reported that the bidders included advertising entrepreneur John Singleton, merchant banker David Kingston, "and a bevy of regional TV operators keen to spread their wings." [*SMH* 30/10/96, 29] The successful bidder for the Darwin licence was Queensland satellite service provider Telecasters Australia which purchased the right to compete against Territory Television for \$2.1 million, narrowly edging out the Aboriginal satellite service, Imparja. Prime Television had the winning bid for the Mildura licence (\$3.2 million) after early interest from Southern Cross. Prime indicated it would broadcast into Mildura via microwave from its Ballarat station. Under the terms of the licences, the holders had twelve months to establish a new television service in the market, or to seek the ABA's permission for an extension.

Announcing the licence allocation in Mildura, the ABA said it was the first commercial television broadcasting licence to be allocated under its price-based allocation system, and the first commercial television licence to be offered to new players since a licence for Perth was granted in 1986. The Authority's Acting Chairman, Tim O'Keefe described the allocation in the Mildura-Sunraysia area as answering a "long expressed demand"

from Mildura residents for a second commercial service in the area. [ABA news release, 8/1/97]

ABA Chairman Webb saw the new commercial television licence in Darwin as representing the successful culmination of the ABA's planning process in the Darwin area: "The people of Darwin can look forward to the introduction of this news service." [ABA news release, 3/2/97] A second licence for Griffith was expected to be allocated and operating by 1997-8, although the process had not been finalised at the time of submission of this thesis.

Implementation issues

By 1996, stations in aggregated areas had moved towards the completion of their various implementation plans. In Approved Market C, the deadline for implementation was December 1996, while in Approved Market A it was December 1997. The other markets had until December 1998 to complete their process of aggregation.

Implementation timetables varied depending on the particular technological demands of each market. In southern New South Wales, for example, the stations chose to expand their services rapidly. Gough recalled that from WIN's point of view:

We and our competitors effectively chose to go with most of it within the first twelve months, so that we got most of the population covered within the first twelve months. [Gough 1996, 8]

In Queensland, WIN had a two-year implementation program, with five separate time benchmarks: the first in December 1990, another in June 1991, the third in December 1991, the fourth in June 1992, and the final benchmark in December 1992. According to Gough:

... [the benchmarks] were to give us an opportunity of a progressive roll-out because the distances are so great. There's no way that we had enough men just to go out and do all these things all over the place all in the one hit. [Gough 1996, 8]

With the process essentially complete in each area, the companies were able to focus on particular reception trouble spots and add additional translators where needed, for example Talbingo and Adelong in south western New South Wales were supplied with WIN translators in 1995 because of complaints of poor reception.

Knowles of the ABA believed the implementation plan requirement greatly assisted in a relatively smooth transition to aggregation. Rebates of license fees were contingent on successful completion of the implementation plan, so, at a time of critical financial constraint, each station had a monetary incentive to ensure their plan was carried through. He said the process was a team effort between the regional television industry and the Department, and that nearly every station went ahead with their original plan:

The government's role was to initiate a scheme and allow it to happen, or to an extent push it to happen, depending on your perspective. But having done that it was really up to the entrepreneurs and the investors to decide how they'd do it, so there was provision for them to actually phase in the implementation in a way which allowed them to fund it. [Knowles 1996, 4]

However, even with the phased implementation, from the stations' viewpoint it was hard to avoid the fact that aggregation meant embarking on an extremely expensive venture in a relatively short period of time. It also meant having to rapidly fabricate a local image and identity with a new audience; hence slogans such as "Watch Wollongong become a Capital City" as Capital attempted to make its mark in the Illawarra, and "We all look to WIN" in the central west, where previously WIN had been unknown. According to Rushton:

In hindsight, as an industry we were our own worst enemy. Had we really sat down and looked at the whole problem we probably could have come up with a better method than aggregation. It's an extremely short-sighted and stupid policy to treble TV services overnight. [Rushton 1992, 14]

Gough agreed that the process leading to aggregation was rushed:

There is no doubt that the whole process was far too hasty. As a consequence of that, decisions were taken which in hindsight were collectively wrong. [Gough 1996, 9]

He referred in particular to the Department of Communications' insistence that new transmitters were installed in the areas where the old transmitters had stood, even though with all stations moving to UHF, the locations might no longer have been appropriate. In the days of VHF transmission, transmitter sites were chosen to give as broad a coverage as possible to ensure the signal reached the widest area; however the same criteria did not apply to UHF transmitters. Gough said this resulted in ongoing poor reception in many areas, include Wide Bay, Hervey Bay, Maryborough and Bundaberg in Queensland, and wastage in other regions, for example, western New South Wales. In that region, a VHF transmitter had been established on the highest hilltop near Coonabarabran to cover a vast area. Under aggregation, a million-dollar transmitter was placed near Coonabarabran, but was inadequate to reach the city of Dubbo which then required its own translator. Similarly, the transmitter near Narrabri in north-western New South Wales was supposed to cover the Tamworth region, but Tamworth had to have its own transmitter and the Narrabri installation in effect covered nothing. According to Gough, history will show that many locations were simply inappropriate:

When people look at this they'll say "why did these stupid people put transmitters in those places when really they should have been somewhere else". . . Transmitters just stuck there for historical reasons are not cost effective. They're not the way to do it. Had we had the chance to spend a year arguing with [the Department], we may in fact have got some sense, by saying this is technically inappropriate, and from a public point of view it's inappropriate. [Gough 1996, 9]

Knowles, however, defended the Department's position, saying that it would have been difficult to put the installations anywhere else, as environmental studies had already been carried out on the existing locations.

Other markets

Like the Northern Territory, other areas of sparse population including regional Western Australia and South Australia, were not considered as part of the original aggregation policy. The ABT said that "planning for television markets in South Australia, Western Australia and the Northern Territory will conclude at a future date." [ABT 1989, 3]

In 1995, the ABA invited expressions of interest for a second commercial television service in regional Western Australia. Four submissions were received; however plans for a second station were put on hold when the existing regional supplier, the Golden West Network [GWN] owned by Kerry Stokes, entered into a 15-year exclusive programming deal with the Nine network. The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission investigated the arrangement and ruled it anti-competitive, on the grounds that it was a strong deterrent for a second licensee to enter the regional market in Western Australia. The ACCC had similar misgivings about a mirror long-term exclusive contract between Seven and Territory Television in Darwin, owned by Nine:

Its suspicions about the deals were heightened by ‘the close timing of their signature’ - which coincided with the Australian Broadcasting Authority’s call for expressions of interest in second commercial licences in those two licence areas. [SMH 6/4/96, 27]

At the same time, the Commission’s ruling thwarted an attempt by Stokes to sell GWN to the Seven network for \$72.8 million. According to the *Australian*, the \$72.8 million valuation of GWN was based partly on its exclusive Nine and Seven programming, which shored up GWN’s monopoly against any potential competitors. [*Australian* 6/4/96, 18]

In an independent report into Seven’s attempted purchase of Golden West, Ernst & Young said a competitor was unlikely because of the heavy capital cost of equipment to broadcast throughout the vast regional WA licence area, and because the Nine programming deal meant any new entrant would be stuck with programs from “ratings laggard Ten Network.” [SMH 6/4/96, 27]

News of the GWN-Nine deal led to the withdrawal of several expressions of interest, including a submission from Melbourne businesswoman Eva Presser, the controller of Sunraysia which delivered the Nine network signal in Perth, Perth businessman Jack Bendat, and a consortium of businessmen from Albany. Before it entered into the deal with Golden West, the Nine network had also expressed interest in bidding for a licence. The ACCC later launched Federal Court proceedings against Seven, Nine and Golden

West, alleging the companies had breached provisions of the Trade Practices Act by entering into exclusive programming agreements with one another. [SMH, 25/10/96] According to the *Australian*, the ACCC alleged that in late 1995:

. . . Nine promised Seven it would not apply for a licence to operate in GWN's West Australian region. Seven, in turn, agreed to withdraw its application for a licence in the Darwin area where Nine's Territory Television operated. . . part of the agreement was that Nine would exclusively supply its programs to GWN and Seven would exclusively supply its programs to TT. This would leave any new operator with programming only from Ten, against the cream of Seven and Nine programming. [Australian 25/10/96, 32]

A few days later, Nine agreed to unwind its programming deal between Territory Television and the Seven Network, but the Nine/GWN deal remained in place.

In August 1996, the ABA made a second attempt at establishing another television station in regional Western Australia, again inviting expressions of interest for a second commercial licence. Parties were asked to express whether they wished to apply for a single licence covering the entire state except metropolitan Perth, or for one of four possible regional licences. "The option ultimately chosen will depend on investor interest," said ABA Chairman Peter Webb. [SMH 22/8/96, 27]

Three months later, it was announced that the Golden West Network had been sold to Prime Television for \$71 million, in spite of the future of possible competition and a cloud over its programming arrangements as a result of the court action by the ACCC. Prime's Chief Executive, George Brown, played down the significance of these potential problems, saying "everything had been taken into account in the purchase price." [SMH 13/11/96, 33]

In February 1997, Webb told the ABA's inaugural Broadcasting Planning Seminar in Canberra that the Authority believed allocation of a second licence in regional Western Australia was "both feasible and unambiguously in the public interest." However, he

warned that the people of the region needed to understand that development of a new service would depend on the market:

In the marketplace at the present time, there are still some unknowns about the availability of sufficient programs and about the means by which some programs might be delivered to the more inaccessible areas of the region. [ABA news release, 24/2/97]

One of the potential bidders, Bendat, later said “nobody in their right mind” would apply for the second licence unless the ACCC could break the programming agreements:

People living in this area are not second-class citizens and they do deserve equal to what the rest of the population receives which is in excess of three commercial services. [SMH 19/3/97, 31]

Bendat conceded that his feasibility studies showed it would cost “about \$30 million” to set up a television station in competition to GWN, and the service would only be viable if the new licence holder had no programming disadvantages to its rival. [SMH 19/3/97, 31]

New technologies and the future

The economic impact of aggregation was likely to be compounded by the effects of new technology on television in general, although the extent of such effects on regional television, as on metropolitan broadcasting, could not be predicted.

By late 1997 the metropolitan networks were beginning to feel the pressure of the proposed changeover from analogue broadcasting to digital television technology. The change brought the possibility of additional channels if the government decided to grant more licences, and at the very least would entail considerable expense for each operator in the upgrading of studio, camera and transmitter equipment. The ABA recommended that the government support the early introduction of digital terrestrial television broadcasting [DTTB], and that it be introduced as a high definition television system, enabling viewers to take advantage of the larger screen home-theatre-style receivers which were already in demand overseas. The ABA said openly that the introduction of

digital television would require the most expensive makeover that Australian television infrastructure was ever likely to have. According to ABA Chairman Webb:

The technological makeover of studios and the erection of digital transmitters for metropolitan and larger regional markets in the first two or three years will require a capital investment of some \$210 million from the commercial television industry, plus annual maintenance costs of around \$20 million. [ABA media release, 5/2/97]

There was initial agreement by the networks to co-operate with the changeover - a move necessary for the government to encourage viewers to purchase the required new television sets, but on the proviso that no more competition was introduced for fifteen years. The government made a counter-offer of a five-year period in which no new free-to-air licences would be granted. The *SMH* reported:

The Government has repeatedly said that new technologies will open up the Australian media industry and that concerns about media concentration will become a thing of the past. [*SMH* 28/8/97, 25]

As well as the possible ramifications of developments in the free-to-air domain, regional stations waited to assess the full impact of pay-television and the advent of multiple satellite services. That was particularly pertinent in areas of inferior transmission, where licensees had to make decisions on the improvement of services. According to Gough:

People will be able to choose to watch other things, so would they necessarily want a \$200,000 translator with four services on it, when in fact maybe the satellite installation will give them 55 or 60 different services. . . Why would we go and invest money in something when in fact it's a dead loss? [Gough 1996, 10]

The impact of new technology on regional television was seen to be closely associated with the experiences of the metropolitan affiliates, which did not suffer an immediate effect when pay-television was introduced, but showed gradual signs that some change was being felt. The effect was also expected to be experienced keenly in solus regional markets, where viewers had not previously had any programming choice. The *Australian* reported that signs were emerging that pay TV had begun poaching viewers from the free-to-air networks, with the impact most strongly felt by children's programs. The newspaper said that about thirteen per cent of households in Sydney and Melbourne subscribed to pay TV, with research indicating pay TV had ten per cent of the under-

twelve audience but only about four per cent of the adult audience: “This mirrored what happened in the US when cable TV children’s channels were introduced. Children switched to pay TV much more quickly than adults.” [*Australian* 25/8/97, 1] According to Knowles, the full effect of technological change on the television industry generally and regional television in particular would not be felt until Australians had been won over to the new wide-screen television receivers:

Whether the loss is to video stores or to free-to-air television stations, pretty much remains to be seen. It’s not going to happen overnight. We’re talking 2020. People have to get the new equipment. [Knowles 1996, 4]

The ABA believed that while the pay TV industry in Australia was likely to achieve very respectable household penetration rates, free to air television would remain the television of choice for the clear majority of Australians for many years to come. However, it said, the long term future of both national and commercial free to air television in this country was uncertain, while-ever they remained “stuck in analogue.” [ABA media release, 13/8/97]

Summary

It can be seen that notwithstanding continued reluctance by some regional operators because of anticipated financial hardship, the implementation of aggregation proceeded relatively smoothly. It commenced in Approved Marked C (southern New South Wales) on schedule and was adopted throughout the eastern states of Australia, with subsequent moves to introduce additional services in other areas. The policy affected every part of regional stations’ operations, including the provision of news services which will be examined in the following chapters.

CHAPTER THREE: THE EFFECT OF AGGREGATION ON THE STRUCTURE OF REGIONAL TELEVISION NEWS SERVICES

One evening in the autumn of 1989, a new phenomenon was experienced in a regional television news room. It was six o'clock; the time the news went to air. The stories for that day had been well and truly bedded down; edit suites were idle, typewriter keys silent. The bustle of the newsroom had been transferred upstairs to the control room and onto the studio floor. On a normal day, the journalists and camera crews would have either been on their way home, or already there; the diligent watching that night's bulletin go to air, the rest pursuing other interests.

But this was not a normal day. There was a new kind of bustle in the newsroom. All the staff not required for on-air duties were gathered around the one television set in the office. For the first time, they were watching a local news bulletin go to air that was not their own. There was tension in the room - what if the newcomer got something they didn't? - mixed with the smugness of experience. Laughter at some first-night on-air gaffes. Relief when it turned out the new station had no tricks up its sleeve. Similar scenes have since been played and re-played in regional newsrooms up and down the eastern states of Australia, as new news services were launched in what were previously monopoly markets. [East archive, notes March 1989]

Just as aggregation changed the fabric of regional television in Australia, so it wrought immense changes on the practice of journalism in regional areas. Some changes were structural; with rapid expansion and then contraction of regional television news. Others, to be considered in Chapter 4, were more subtle and were brought about by the onset of competition, the influence of the metropolitan network affiliates, and financial pressures.

At the time of aggregation, local new services in regional television posed a dilemma for station management because while news was a channel's most expensive program, it also had the potential to be the greatest earner in terms of advertising attracted through

ratings. News, therefore, was regarded by many station executives as both hero and villain. It devoured resources in terms of set-up and ongoing costs, required constant upgrading to its technology, and certain stories could upset station sponsors or attract legal action, but in many cases the local news bulletin also enjoyed the status of being a major money-spinner. Before aggregation, local news services in many markets were the most popular programs in their region, preferred over national programs despite their comparative lack of sophistication. When the policy was implemented, news was, in many cases, seen as a way of either shoring up viewers or making inroads into an incumbent's territory. It was one of the main weapons in the new commercial battleground of aggregation. NBN's annual report of 1980 expressed both sides of the news argument bluntly:

News is our most expensive operation. The News Service continues to dominate the audience survey results. [NBN Annual Report 1980, 11]

Denis Ledbury of NBN believed that a strong 6pm bulletin was imperative to launch a station into the evening's viewing schedule:

It is after that point that the strength of the network's programs come into effect, but without a solid lead-in as a promotional base, the performance of network programs could vary significantly. [*B & T Weekly* 22/3/96, 26]

Similarly, WIN Television believed local news was vital to success in aggregated markets:

WIN Television network program manager Rod Hockey asserts that the strength of WIN's local news, as well as heavy promotional activity within the various communities, were key factors determining the network's strong performance in the markets of Rockhampton, Toowoomba, Cairns and Townsville (North Queensland), Wollongong and Canberra (NSW), and Ballarat, Shepparton, Gippsland, Bendigo and Hobart (Victoria and Tasmania). [*B & T Weekly* 22/3/96, 26]

At the same time, news stood in the way of some of the economic advantages to be gained by duplicating services over a wider viewing area and attracting a larger advertising clientele. While programs could be mass marketed to the wider viewing audience, news was locked into geographical boundaries. O'Regan wrote that from a network perspective of the maximum utilisation of resources, the pre-satellite situation

where individual local stations provided their own self-contained news was “obviously duplicative and inefficient.” [1987, 8]

For those within the newsroom walls, somewhat separated from commercial reality, the role of news was seen from a different perspective. Far from being a means to an end, a recipe for commercial success, the nightly bulletin was an end in itself, a daily challenge which provided the satisfaction of seeing one’s handiwork publicly displayed. Whatever changes came about as a result of government or management decisions, the news had to go to air each night.

Regional television is considered by those who have come through its ranks to be a hard but valuable journalistic training ground. Unlike a metropolitan program, a local news bulletin cannot be supplemented by international or interstate material. It is based on a limited geographical area, often with a relatively small population, large distances to cover and restricted options for generating stories. Rather than relying on the news wire services such as Australian Associated Press or a large amount of pre-organised news such as media conferences, high-level political meetings and launches, regional reporters must rely on their local knowledge and contacts to generate sufficient news to fill their program. Resources are also limited in comparison with capital city newsrooms; a team of between three and five journalists may be required to fill a half-hour program, each reporter doing two or three stories each day, with no researchers or assistant producers to help. There may be two or three camera operators and one or two edit suites, forcing early deadlines to ensure all stories can be completed in time to go to air.

Through aggregation, journalists embraced the new challenges of competition, found additional ways to cut corners and still get the story under ever-tightening budgets, and often paid the price when their program did not meet ratings expectations. As part of the examination of equalisation in a public policy context, specific effects on news services will be analysed, avoiding where possible the temptation to evaluate the success of aggregated news services purely on a commercial basis through the ratings they

attracted. An attempt will be made to gauge how aggregation affected the actual practice of journalism in regional television; how it changed editorial decision-making through new geographical boundaries, increasing competition and decreasing resources, and altered the careers of journalists and camera operators.

Some information contained in the following sections was gleaned from a survey of news editors/chiefs of staff in all aggregated regions, conducted in May 1996 [Appendix 2]. Those surveyed were asked to specify the type of news service provided and how it had changed, if at all, since the implementation of aggregation. They were also asked about staffing levels, and whether, in their view, their region generally received a better or poorer quality of local television news across all available stations after aggregation. They were questioned on their views about competition, and the ideal number of television services for their region. They were also given the opportunity to comment on aggregation in general. Initial response to the survey was disappointing, with only ten of 36 written questionnaires returned. This highlighted a major difficulty in researching this area; the reluctance of currently-serving news staff to provide information or comment on their station's activities under aggregation, for fear of the consequences. Of those received, comments included the following:

It is my considered opinion that there is an urgent need for a complete evaluation of aggregation and its effect on the viewing public along with the people who work in the industry outside the major capitals.

It's been good for viewers, but the market is probably not big enough to fully support three commercial services. Two might make a decent return on investment.

Aggregation has undoubtedly brought better choice to regional Australia, but has also hurt local programming and "thinned" regional TV stations (whether they were fat or not beforehand is debatable).

Networks have become dominant, perhaps to the detriment of local programs and the regions the stations serve. However apart from news, which has survived, I don't think viewers care.

Other comments relating to resources and the effect of competition are included in the relevant sections. However, due to the size of the survey and the response, the views expressed are not presented as quantitative information; rather as pertinent comments from people working in the industry.

The majority of staff who failed to respond were subsequently contacted. While not all wished to give their views, some information was provided anonymously. Coupled with the recollections of those who have since left the industry, this made possible the compilation of a picture of developments in local news services in the years since the policy was implemented.

Organisation of local news services

As aggregation implementation dates approached in the various approved markets, each licensee weighed up the role local news would play in its individual campaign. In some viewing areas, the service provided by the incumbent was copied by one or both of the new players. Other stations opted for a different approach, in the hope that viewers would be wooed away from their traditional news provider by something novel. Some decided to steer away from providing local news at all, or deferred the decision until they could better gauge the commercial toll of the aggregation process.

Within these different approaches, a number of news strategies emerged. One was a continuation of the traditional style of local news bulletin; half an hour of stories based on a specific viewing area, followed by a national bulletin from the station's network affiliate. Such a bulletin posed a problem in the post-aggregation era because of the new requirement for a regional station to fall in line with its network affiliate's programming schedule. In the past, a station could show its own local news live, record the national news of its choice, and replay the national bulletin at whatever time it desired. Now regional stations had a dilemma because their affiliate's news was usually shown at the time they wanted to broadcast their local news.

Compromises had to be struck with the networks; WIN was able to continue its pre-aggregation arrangement, showing its local bulletin at the optimum time, 6pm, while recording Channel 9’s news which was “turned around” and broadcast at 6.30. While that was on air, WIN would record *A Current Affair* off Nine, for re-broadcast at 7pm. The program shown on Nine at 7pm would generally be shown by WIN in the 5.30pm timeslot, courtesy of a pre-arranged tape. Prime had a similar arrangement with Seven, although the deal struck some difficulties which are considered later.

Following is a hypothetical example of a half-hour local news bulletin based on the central west of New South Wales. Sample times have been shown as a general representation of the make-up of the bulletin:

| HALF-HOUR LOCAL NEWS BULLETIN |
|---|
| Headlines: Fire, protest, water 30 secs |
| 1. Orange school fire 2.30 |
| 2. Bathurst protest 2.00 |
| 3. Orange/Dubbo crime figures 2.00 |
| 4. Blayney shoplifting spate 2.30 |
| Commercial break 2.15 |
| 5. New orange school crossing 1.30 |
| 6. Mudgee wine festival 2.00 |
| 7. Dubbo art competition 1.45 |
| 8. Bathurst fashion parade 45 secs |
| Commercial break 2.15 |
| 9. Orange/Bathurst golf challenge 2.00 |
| 10. Dubbo cricket 1.00 |
| 11. Parkes trots 1.20 |
| Commercial break 2.00 |
| 12. Weather 2.00 |
| 13. Forbes reunion 1.40 |

Another style was the integrated approach; the type of bulletin already presented by NBN Newcastle and CTC Canberra before aggregation, featuring a mingling of stories generated by journalists in the local area, and national and international stories from the network affiliate. The network stories would be recorded off a “feed” from the affiliate

and some would be re-packaged - additional pictures added or new voice-over recorded - to give them a local flavour. Some integrated bulletins ran for an hour, combining what would normally make up a half-hour local bulletin with a full complement of national stories. Others ran for half an hour, minimising the number of both local and national stories which could be presented.

This is an example of a half-hour integrated bulletin:

| HALF-HOUR INTEGRATED BULLETIN |
|---|
| Headlines: Fire, murder, protest 30secs |
| 1. Orange school fire 2.30 |
| 2. State politics 1.20 |
| 3. Sydney murder 40 secs |
| 4. Bathurst protest 2.00 |
| Commercial break 2.15 |
| 5. Federal politics 1.20 |
| 6. Orange/Dubbo crime figures 2.00 |
| 7. US Presidential campaign 1.30 |
| 8. Overseas wrap 1.00 |
| 9. Blayney shoplifting spate 2.30 |
| Commercial break 2.15 |
| 10. Orange/Bathurst golf challenge 2.00 |
| 11. National tennis 1.30 |
| 12. Dubbo cricket 1.00 |
| Commercial break 2.00 |
| 13. Weather 2.00 |
| 14. Forbes reunion 1.40 |

A half-hour integrated bulletin required careful selection of both local and national stories, as there was minimal time for each. Where possible, national stories were cut down or “wrapped” together, and any reference to local people or issues in national stories was highlighted in the introduction to the story.

A one-hour integrated bulletin, on the other hand, had the advantage of allowing flexibility in the balance between local and national stories; on a day when there was plenty of strong news from the local area, more local stories could be run at the expense

of some of the more obscure national items. On a quiet day locally, the bulletin could be weighted towards national stories. These could generally be selected from any station within the metropolitan network, for example, the producer of a Channel 9-affiliated bulletin in New South Wales might choose to run a story from QTQ Brisbane because it had a reference to the local region in it - perhaps the new Queensland governor originated from the regional station's local area - even though the Sydney affiliate was not running the story. A request could be made for the Brisbane item to be sent down on the regular news feed - although this was risky as regional requests were often at the bottom of the list of the national station's priorities. An example of a one-hour integrated bulletin:

| ONE-HOUR INTEGRATED BULLETIN | |
|---|---|
| Headlines: Fire, protest water 30 secs | 16. Tamworth music festival 1.00 |
| 1. Orange school fire 2.30 | Commercial break 2.00 |
| 2. Bathurst protest 2.00 | 17. Governor General illness 1.20 |
| 3. Orange/Dubbo crime figures 2.00 | 18. Hospital funding 2.00 |
| 4. Blayney shoplifting spate 2.30 | 19. Sydney facelift 1.00 |
| Commercial break 2.15 | 20. RSPCA open day 1.30 |
| 5. State politics 1.20 | 21. School choir spectacular 1.00 |
| 6. Sydney murder 40 secs | Commercial break 2.00 |
| 7. Federal politics 1.20 | 22. Orange/Bathurst golf challenge 2.00 |
| 8. Sydney traffic jam 1.40 | 23. Dubbo cricket 1.00 |
| Commercial break 2.15 | 24. Parkes trots 1.20 |
| 9. New Orange school crossing 1.30 | Commercial break 2.00 |
| 10. Mudgee wine festival 2.00 | 25. National tennis 30 secs |
| 11. Dubbo art competition 1.45 | 26. Super league latest READ |
| 12. Bathurst fashion parade 45 secs | 27. Swimming team training 1.30 |
| Commercial break 2.00 | 28. Swans update 2.00 |
| 13. US Presidential campaign 1.30 | Commercial break 2.00 |
| 14. Italian floods 1.40 | 29. Weather (local and national) 3.00 |
| 15. Overseas wrap 1.00 | 30. Forbes reunion 1.40 |

A third approach was a regional bulletin, combining one or more viewing areas within an approved market to form an expanded viewing area over a wider region. This style of bulletin gave greater scope of stories than a local bulletin, but also meant that viewers would have to get used to seeing stories from outside their traditional area.

Following is an example of a regional bulletin:

| |
|--|
| REGIONAL BULLETIN |
| Headlines; Fire, court, crime 30 secs |
| 1. Orange school fire 2.30 |
| 2. Wagga court story 1.30 |
| 3. Bathurst protest 2.00 |
| 4. Regional crime figures 2.00 |
| Commercial break 2.15 |
| 5. Wagga shopping development 1.00 |
| 6. Dubbo water shortage 1.30 |
| 7. Blayney shoplifting spate 2.30 |
| 8. Griffith air show 1.00 |
| Commercial break 2.15 |
| 9. Orange/Bathurst golf challenge 2.00 |
| 10. Wagga/Dubbo cricket wrap 2.30 |
| 11. Regional trots 1.20 |
| Commercial break 2.00 |
| 12. Weather 2.30 |
| 13. Forbes reunion 1.40 |

In a regional bulletin, a careful balance needed to be struck between the participating areas to ensure no one part of the market dominated. This was not always simple, particularly when there was a story of major importance happening in one part of the viewing area which was not necessarily of interest anywhere else. Where possible, stories were made generic, so the crime statistics from each centre were turned into a regional story on crime figures, and the trots story became a round-up of harness racing in the extended region.

A fourth strategy involved the insertion of local windows into a bulletin generated from another region; the windows were made up of stories compiled by journalists in a particular area, usually fed to the main station and played as a whole break (a complete segment of the bulletin between commercial breaks), but only seen in the area from which the stories originated. Some stations used multiple windows, generating separate

local segments to a number of different viewing areas as part of their main local bulletin. Windows were used either as local content in an integrated bulletin, or to create a more local effect in a regional bulletin.

This is an example of how windows would work if a station broadcasting in central west New South Wales decided to provide a separate service to Dubbo.

| LOCAL BULLETIN WITH WINDOWS | |
|--|---|
| Main local bulletin (Orange/Bathurst) | Windows (Dubbo) |
| Headlines: Fire, protest, crime 30scs | Headlines: Crime, farmers, harvest 30 |
| 1. Orange school fire 2.30 | 1. Dubbo crime figures 1.30 |
| 2. Bathurst protest 2.00 | 2. Dubbo Council 2.20 |
| 3. Orange crime figures 1.20 | 3. Nyngan farmers meeting 2.30 |
| 4. Blayney shoplifting spate 2.30 | 4. Coonabarabran harvest 2.00 |
| Commercial break 2.15 | Commercial break 2.15 |
| 5. New Orange school crossing 1.30 | <i>2nd segment same as main bulletin</i> |
| 6. Mudgee wine festival 2.00 | |
| 7. Dubbo art competition 1.45 | |
| 8. Bathurst fashion expo 1.45 | |
| Commercial break 2.15 | Commercial break 2.15 |
| 9. Orange/Bathurst golf 2.00 | <i>3rd segment same as main bulletin</i> |
| 10. Dubbo cricket 1.00 | |
| 11. Parkes trots 1.20 | |
| Commercial break 2.00 | Commercial break 2.00 |
| 12. Orange/Bathurst weather 2.00 | 12. Dubbo weather 2.00 |
| 13. Forbes reunion 1.40 | 13. Forbes reunion 1.40 |

Placing windows in a regional bulletin could have the effect of more local news, but it was quite labour-intensive for the amount of news produced and viewers still saw stories from outside their area. It also meant that the viewing area receiving the windows, in this case Dubbo, did not necessarily receive the best stories from the wider region. Instead of the top four stories from the main local bulletin being seen in Dubbo, ease of operation meant that the second segment contained a mixture of Dubbo stories and less important Orange/Bathurst stories.

Following is an example of an hour-long integrated bulletin with local windows:

| HOURLY-LONG INTEGRATED BULLETIN WITH LOCAL WINDOWS | |
|---|---|
| MAIN BULLETIN (ORANGE) | WINDOWS (DUBBO) |
| Headlines: Fire, protest, murder 30 secs | Headlines: Crime, Council, farmers |
| 1. Orange school fire 2.30 | 1. Dubbo crime figures |
| 2. Bathurst protest 2.00 | 2. Dubbo Council |
| 3. Orange crime figures 1.20 | 3. Nyngan farmers meeting |
| 4. Blayney shoplifting spate 2.30 | 4. Coonabarabran harvest |
| Commercial break 2.15 | Commercial break 2.15 |
| 5. State politics 1.20 | <i>2nd segment same as main bulletin</i> |
| 6. Sydney murder 30 secs | |
| 7. Federal politics 1.15 | |
| 8. Sydney traffic jam 1.40 | |
| Commercial break 2.15 | Commercial break 2.15 |
| 9. New Orange school crossing 1.30 | 9. Plans for local high school |
| 10. Mudgee wine festival 2.00 | 10. Dubbo retailers meeting |
| 11. Cowra tourism READ | 11. Warren farm trials |
| 12. Bathurst fashion expo 1.45 | 12. Dubbo art competition |
| Commercial break 2.00 | Commercial break 2.00 |
| 13. US Presidential campaign 45 secs | <i>4th segment same as main bulletin</i> |
| 14. Italian floods 1.40 | |
| 15. Overseas wrap 40 secs | |
| 16. Tamworth music festival 2.00 | |
| Commercial break 2.30 | Commercial break 2.30 |
| 17. Governor General illness 1.20 | <i>5th segment same as main bulletin</i> |
| 18. Hospital funding 2.00 | |
| 19. Sydney facelift 2.00 | |
| 20. RSPCA open day 1.30 | |
| 21. School choir spectacular 2.00 | |
| Commercial break 2.30 | Commercial break 2.30 |
| 22. Orange/Bathurst golf challenge 1.00 | 22. Dubbo cricket 1.00 |
| 23. Cowra cyclist 1.00 | 23. Melinda Gainsford latest 1.00 |
| 24. Parkes trots 20 secs | 24. Parkes trots 20 secs |
| Commercial break 2.30 | Commercial break 2.30 |
| 25. National tennis/Swans wrap 2.30 secs | <i>7th segment same as main bulletin</i> |
| 26. Super league latest 2.50 | |
| 27. Swimming team training 1.30 | |
| Commercial break 2.30 | Commercial break 2.30 |
| 28. Weather (Orange/Bathurst) 1.30 | 28. Weather (Dubbo) 1.30 |
| 29. Forbes reunion 1.40 | 29. Forbes reunion 1.40 |

Running local windows in an hour-long integrated bulletin provided maximum flexibility for local coverage. A number of stories would still have appeal across the wider region, and items from towns in the middle of the two areas would run in both segments.

The style of bulletin adopted dictated the resources required by individual stations. For some, it was a case of launching a fully-fledged newsroom into a new area, while for others, it simply required establishing a bureau or coming to an arrangement with a freelance crew in the area.

The key developments in news in each approved market are summarised below. Where appropriate, approved markets have been broken down into individual viewing areas. Figures 1 - 19 (pp 270 - 288) show these developments in condensed form.

Approved Market C - Southern New South Wales

Wollongong viewing area (figure 1)

WIN Television, the incumbent in Wollongong, provided a half-hour local news service which was its top-rating program. The bulletin had developed over the station's 25-year history, starting as a brief repetition of stories out of the local paper, then gradually building up to a half-hour duration. At the start of aggregation in the southern New South Wales pilot area, WIN's local news was firmly established at 6pm, followed by National Nine News at 6.30. During the mid-80s the station had dabbled with the idea of showing its local news at 6.30 after a live national news, but it soon changed back to its regular format following concerns that it was being beaten on its own local stories - under the 6.30 local format, when a big event happened in Wollongong and WIN's pictures were sent to Nine, the metropolitan network got to run them first. On Sundays in Wollongong, WIN had once provided a half-hour integrated bulletin comprised of a local first break (the segment of news from the opening headlines to the first commercial break), a national second break, and a mixture of local and national sport and weather. This was later changed to a fifteen minute local Sunday bulletin before the national news.

At the time of aggregation, the station had changed to five-minute pre-recorded newsbreaks on both Saturday and Sunday, at 5.55pm.

WIN's new competitors, Prime and Capital, both opted to provide a news service in Wollongong at the start of aggregation. Prime established a complete newsroom at its new Berkeley station and launched its own half-hour bulletin at 6pm, in direct competition with the WIN product. Capital took a different approach, setting up a news bureau in Wollongong consisting of a journalist and camera crew, and producing windows which were inserted into its hour-long integrated bulletin generated from Canberra. Because they could concentrate on the best stories of the day, the material produced by the Capital crew was of a superior technical standard to that generated by WIN and Prime, both constrained by stretched resources and tight editing deadlines. The Capital journalist could spend more time researching a story and uncovering additional information. Capital also worked with a sound operator - something not seen before in regional television in Wollongong, where camera operators were accustomed also to looking after the sound.

The Prime bulletin went through a number of changes, including a switch to a 15 minute bulletin at 5.45pm for a short time in the early days of aggregation. At one stage, it was reduced to a five-minute news update over a prolonged Christmas holiday break, and there was speculation that it would not reappear as an extended bulletin. However, it did resume as a half-hour product at 6pm, where it stayed until January 1996, when pressure from the Seven network led to a decision across the Prime regional network to screen the local news at 5.30, followed by the national news live at 6pm and *Today Tonight* at 6.30. At the time Prime attempted to promote the idea as a move to present the news "first" in Wollongong. The Station Manager, David Thistlethwaite explained:

The early bulletin gives us a point of difference to the WIN situation. We can put the local news on first and then expand into the wider network of news and current affairs to give even greater coverage. [*Illawarra Mercury* 19/1/96, 28]

The decision was reversed in August 1996, with Prime defying Seven and dropping *Today Tonight* from its evening timeslot. The *SMH*'s Television Guide reported that the current affairs program would go to air mid-morning, the day after it had aired on Seven:

[Prime] which operates in NSW, Victoria and Queensland, has reinstated its local news at 6pm, followed by Seven's bulletin at 6.30pm. Marketing and promotions general manager Peter Browne reportedly said regional markets were "absolutely mad about local news". [*SMH* 22/8/96]

Despite its slick presentation, Capital's foray into local news in Wollongong did not last. Just before Christmas 1989, the first year of aggregation, staff were given word that the Wollongong news bureau was closing. The office would remain open to facilitate commercial sales and production. According to Capital's former News Director, Ken Begg, the venture did not succeed because the public did not take it seriously:

Wollongong was the first market that we had to go in and aggregate. We made our best efforts down there, but we just didn't dent the market. WIN was strongly established in that marketplace and viewers are smarter. They can see through what is either a fair dinkum thing or what is token, so with the best will in the world we could not compete. [Begg 1996, 3]

Capital continued to broadcast its Canberra news into Wollongong for several years, and in 1991-2 showed signs of resurrecting a stronger news interest in the city - using a stringer to cover major stories such as a prolonged steelworks dispute in 1991. However, the decision was then taken to show the Sydney-based Channel 10 news to the Wollongong viewing area, instead of Capital's bulletin from Canberra.

While Prime did not attempt to show local news on weekends in Wollongong, by 1997 WIN presented pre-recorded one-minute weekend newsbreaks throughout Saturday and Sunday. The studio component of these newsbreaks, once recorded in Wollongong, was later moved to Canberra, and linked back to Wollongong for editing and broadcast. This meant that a journalist was no longer rostered to work over the weekend; stories were shot and, where necessary, interviews conducted, by a camera operator working alone. By late 1997, these newsbreaks were suspended and WIN's service reduced to a Monday to Friday operation.

The incumbent station continued to dominate the news ratings in the Wollongong viewing area, “consistently scoring between 40 and 60 per cent of the market in the half-hour from 6pm weeknights.” [*Illawarra Mercury* 5/12/97, 32]

Canberra viewing area (figure 2)

In Canberra, Capital had established a reputation for a fine news product, integrating local and national stories in a one-hour bulletin. At the time of aggregation, Begg recalled there was concern over the loss of the Nine network to WIN, but there was also a great deal of excitement as a result of Frank Lowy’s purchase of the Ten network. He said Ten had a long-term aim to run a national news out of Canberra, so the news team was being re-built, with a new newsroom and sets and more staff:

It was a quasi regional/national operation at that early stage. It was very exciting, and so the loss of the Nine network was tempered with the enthusiasm that we were about to do something quite bold, and because we were the incumbent station we felt we could win. [Begg 1996, 1]

Unlike its competitors, Capital did not launch local news services in the other viewing areas in Approved Market C except for the small bureau service in Wollongong. “The idea in my view was that you had to hold the fort, and you had to hold the fort well, and repel the invaders and not let them get one inch of your marketplace,” Begg recalled.

Three months before the aggregation date in Canberra, Capital launched what Begg regarded as “quite a revolutionary type format”. The bulletin was similar to the American CNN product, with various specific segments such as entertainment, finance and extended weather. Capital’s market research had suggested that while viewers loved to criticise the station because, before 1989, it was their only commercial option, they also wanted to support it in the new competitive environment provided it gave them the sorts of information they wanted. Begg was convinced that in the Canberra viewing area, a half hour of local news followed by a network news out of Sydney, would not meet viewer needs.

The Canberra market was a lucrative one in advertising terms, and WIN decided to immediately launch a duplicate of its Wollongong half hour local service. It established a newsroom in its new Canberra station, and used its Wollongong newsroom as a training ground for some of the more inexperienced staff. WIN ran its first Canberra local bulletin amid much fanfare on the first day of aggregation. Like Prime in Wollongong, the first night was marred by a series of technical hitches which caused great embarrassment within the station. However, the company stuck doggedly to the format which had brought it such success in its Wollongong home ground, and ultimately the Canberra program built up a strong following.

Prime could also see the commercial potential for a strongly-rating local news service in Canberra, and launched a half-hour service at the beginning of aggregation. However, the financial strain of operating full newsrooms in each of the four viewing areas of Approved Market C took its toll, and Prime Canberra reduced its news to five minute updates. During this period, it was common for WIN and Prime to pool their resources, sending crews to different events and swapping material. WIN's former Canberra News Director, Jeremy Lasek, said at that time WIN did not see Prime as a direct competitor, and the co-operation between the two stations took some pressure off his stretched resources. [Lasek 1997, 1]

The Capital bulletin, initially benefiting from a generous news budget under the early part of the Lowy regime, began to feel the resources pinch of aggregation. This was exacerbated by another ownership change, with Charles Curran purchasing the Capital network, consisting at the time of Canberra, Adelaide and Perth. According to Begg, Curran took a very straightforward business approach, putting in managers to curb cost:

We were the biggest spending department - it's easy to knock off newsrooms. [Begg 1996, 3]

He endeavoured to maintain the high standard Capital had set in terms of news, but it was becoming more and more difficult to present a metropolitan-style program on a decidedly regional budget. Corners had to be cut while measures were implemented to

maintain market share. The weather was further extended to make the most of the popularity of the presenter Michael Larkin, the bulletin began to feature more live crosses, and journalists worked harder at their community contacts.

Added to its financial pressures, Capital's news suffered a near disaster in 1993 when a programming decision led to a timeslot change, from 6pm to 5pm. "The decision was calamitous for Capital," said Begg. The station's flagship program was suddenly on too early for its largely public servant audience. Capital lost a huge amount in advertising revenue as advertisers deserted the news timeslot. The opposition began to run promotions for their news such as "in a changing world, it's nice to know that some things don't change". Begg recalled:

Six weeks later, they had to put it back. And amazingly, we went back to our old ratings. [Begg 1996, 3]

WIN's news bulletin had benefited most from the Capital timeslot change, while Prime had been going through a series of timeslot changes of its own. Prime then approached Begg with a proposal to lead its own one-hour integrated news service. "They had done some American research; they wanted to basically pinch the news team and outgun Capital by doing a Capital," Begg said. He agreed to switch camps and after an early struggle, Prime's news began to climb in the ratings, settling into second place not far behind Capital. However, just as the bulletin was making progress in terms of viewer popularity, the station decided to take it off air because it was too expensive to produce. Begg remained bitter about the experience:

That was the beginning of the end of what I regarded as the great adventure; the commitment to quality, the commitment to good television journalism in my view ended when Prime fell apart. [Begg 1996, 4]

He acknowledged that WIN had evolved into a formidable competitor in Canberra, but regretted what he saw as the demise of a quality integrated one-hour bulletin for a city of more than 300,000.

Prime moved back to a half-hour local bulletin, then changed to a half-hour integrated program. At one stage the station opted for “happy” news, based on American research which recommended an emphasis on good news stories rather than tragedies. WIN continued to benefit from the format changes of its competitors, and the fact that Prime became more of a direct competitor to Capital than to WIN. The Wollongong-based station won the majority of ratings weeks for news in 1996.

Orange and Wagga Wagga viewing areas (figures 3 & 4)

Like many incumbents, Prime enjoyed a very strong audience for its local news in the Orange viewing area at the start of aggregation. Proving that integrated bulletins are not necessarily a new concept, the Orange station had in the 1960s presented a half hour of local, national and international news with film being flown from Sydney to supplement the local stories. With the advent of technology which allowed national news to be taken off air from Sydney, the local news had been reduced to about seven minutes. When the satellite debate began, local news at Orange was expanded to 15 minutes, then 20, and by the early ‘80s it had grown into a half-hour bulletin, covering stories from the nearby major centres of Dubbo and Bathurst, and many outlying towns and farming communities. Former Prime Orange News Editor Peter Andren recalled that at the time, it was pre-recorded and shown at 8.30pm, an arrangement which had considerable appeal for its farming audience who were often still hard at work at six o’clock. However, as network scheduling began to take more precedence, the bulletin moved to 6pm and continued to attract a large following.

Prime in Wagga Wagga, formerly RVN 2, was also a very strong incumbent, with a popular half-hour local news service. At the beginning of aggregation the station employed five journalists comprising the News Editor, Sports Editor, a newsreader/reporter and two general reporters. There were three cameramen/editors, one of them rostered to work on weekends.

In contrast to Canberra and Wollongong, the western area of New South Wales was not considered a very lucrative market in terms of television commercials, and both WIN and Capital chose not to launch their own local news in the area when aggregation began. Capital could see little commercial sense in trying to establish a news presence in each of the very diverse viewing areas within Approved Market C, given the strength of the incumbents. WIN waited three years to begin a news service in the western area, combining the Orange and Wagga Wagga viewing areas. A detailed analysis of the development of WIN's western news service is contained in Chapter 5.

Like all the news services in its regional network, Prime's bulletins emanating from Orange and Wagga Wagga suffered with the decision in 1996 to change to a 5.30 timeslot. However, with the change back to 6pm, Prime continued to be the dominant provider of news in western New South Wales. In 1997 Prime Orange's news operation came under the spotlight through the use of new technology. The company purchased a range of new equipment in the DVCPRO format - a relatively inexpensive digital video system which moved away from the Betacam format used in most networks. The format had already been used in limited form by the company's Newcastle news service, but Orange would be Prime's first full DVCPRO station. The company's chief engineer, Jake Vanderstok, said the new technology would not change the way the Orange news team went about gathering its stories:

It doesn't make any difference in our operation. It's basically just a straight swap-over from Betacam, or ageing Betacam in the case of Orange because some of that was up to 12 years old. [*Broadcast Engineering News* July 1997, 4]

Approved Market A - Queensland

Townsville and Cairns viewing areas (figures 5 & 6)

Prior to aggregation in Queensland in 1991, QTV had provided a half hour news service to Townsville, with separate news and sports windows for Cairns. In the jostling for position at the time of implementation, the Townsville incumbent expected to be an affiliate of the Nine network and planned to do a half-hour statewide regional bulletin, followed by the national news. However, four days before the changeover, it was

discovered that the new network affiliate was to be Ten, which had an hour-long national news bulletin. QTV quickly changed its plans and opted for a one-hour integrated bulletin, featuring windows for each of the six Queensland viewing areas, plus Mt Isa.

Presenting seven separate news service out of one station simultaneously was nothing short of a technical marvel. One uniform news service would be broadcast for the first break of the bulletin, then, using Townsville as the base, QTV broadcast separate pre-recorded news windows to Toowoomba, Bundaberg/Maryborough, Rockhampton, Mackay, Cairns and Mt Isa as well as continuing the live presentation to the Townsville viewing area. The pre-recording of the windows began at 3.30 each afternoon, and the order of recording depended on which of the other viewing areas had late-breaking stories that day. The producer in Townsville would take “bids” from the senior journalists in the outlying bureaus and decide on who would go first, and who last. There also had to be agreement on the duration of the pre-recorded segments each day, with the time ranging from seven to ten minutes depending on the amount of news which could be shared across the market and shown in the first break. All offices were linked by the Basys computer system, enabling journalists in each region to view each other’s scripts and decide on any stories of common interest which could be shown in more than one window. This particularly applied to stories involving such issues as the sugar industry and tourism.

Two journalists and two camera operators were stationed in each news office outside Townsville, and to a large extent, they had control of their own local segments, making decisions about which stories to cover, and their order in the window. All stories were fed to Townsville and loaded into a Betacart machine for broadcast. The local windows contained some sport, but generally, local sport had to be down played and restricted to stories of common interest across the market. A statewide weather was presented, and the station attempted to cover each separate area by using a mixture of local pictures from each region and a large range of temperatures on the weather map.

At the start of aggregation, the Seven affiliate, Sunshine, launched a half hour news service combining Townsville and Cairns. QTV looked on the Sunshine product with some skepticism, believing that Townsville and Cairns were completely different regions and combining their news in one bulletin simply would not work. According to former QTV producer Rex Clark:

Ten believed windows were a way to supply more parochial news.
People wanted to stick with what they perceived to be their local station.
[Clark 1996, 1]

That view was borne out to some extent in 1995, when Sunshine decided to axe its local Townsville/Cairns service and turn the Cairns bureau into the North Queensland bureau for Seven's Brisbane-based national news service. The bureau, staffed by one journalist and one camera operator, was to service the capital city and not the local region.

However, QTV had also decided to end its multiple-window strategy, withdrawing its services to all areas except its home territory of Cairns and Townsville, resulting in the retrenchment of 14 staff. [Clark 1996, 1] In Townsville the service, by 1996 known as Ten Queensland, continued to operate a one-hour integrated bulletin, with one window for the Cairns market produced by a bureau of three journalists and three cameramen/editors. Some stories from Mt Isa were also included, generated by a production crew based there. Cairns stories were put together locally, and fed to Townsville for the pre-recorded Cairns segment. Sport continued to be mainly generic, as the major teams, the North Queensland Cowboys and the Townsville Suns, were considered to represent the Townsville-Cairns region.

WIN hesitated for some time before beginning its own separate half hour local services for both Cairns and Townsville, broadcast from its base in Rockhampton. Stories were shot and edited in the Cairns and Townsville bureaus, and fed to Rockhampton where the half hour bulletins were pre-recorded, using the same presenters, and broadcast back to the local regions at six o'clock.

Mackay viewing area (figure 7)

The incumbent in Mackay, Sunshine, had slowly built its news up to a half hour service prior to aggregation, and it stayed that way, although it was eventually pre-recorded at the Sunshine (later Seven) base in Maroochydore and broadcast back to the Mackay viewing area. By late 1996 the Seven newsroom in Mackay had its own News Editor, plus four other journalists.

At the height of its local news operations in Queensland, QTV presented a Mackay window in its integrated hour-long bulletin from Townsville, but with the axing of most of its windows in 1993, it did not make any other ventures into the Mackay viewing area in terms of local news. WIN Television did not attempt to launch a local news service in Mackay, preferring to consolidate its resources in other viewing areas.

Rockhampton viewing area (figure 8)

WIN was the incumbent in Rockhampton and used its Rockhampton station as a base for transmitting four separate half hour local bulletins; a live service to the immediate local area, and pre-recorded bulletins to Cairns, Townsville and Toowoomba. Sunshine (Seven) did not venture into the Rockhampton view area with a news service, and QTV provided a window in its hour-long bulletin until 1993.

Maryborough viewing area (figure 9)

The Sunshine bulletin broadcast to the Maryborough area (known as Wide Bay/Sunshine Coast) had developed into a half hour local service in 1988, after previously running for twenty minutes at 5.40pm. After aggregation, Sunshine continued to provide a half hour local bulletin to the combined area. Less than twelve months later, it decided to divide the viewing area into Sunshine Coast (south from Gympie) and Wide Bay (north of Gympie, including the centres of Bundaberg, Maryborough and Hervey Bay). Stories based on Gympie were included in both bulletins, as viewers in the town were able to see one or both services based on whether they had UHF or VHF access. The Sunshine Coast half hour bulletin was presented live and the station pre-recorded a half hour Wide

Bay bulletin, along with its Mackay local bulletin. The Wide Bay service was staffed by two journalists each in Bundaberg and Maryborough, with the News Editor based in Maroochydore. As it did in Mackay, WIN stayed away from local news in the Maryborough area. QTV's initial window service was based on a bureau at Bundaberg, and contained primarily Bundaberg-orientated stories.

Toowoomba viewing area (figure 10)

WIN continued to provide a half hour local news service in Toowoomba, where it was the incumbent. At the start of aggregation, pre-recorded introductions read by the newsreader were generated from Rockhampton and fed to Toowoomba, where the actual stories were able to be broadcast to air. By 1997, the station was able to generate its own introductions, using a chroma key background rather than a studio set. The bulletin was pre-recorded at 5pm for a 6pm broadcast. Sunshine did not seek to provide a local service in Toowoomba, while QTV provided a service until 1993 under its ill-fated windows arrangement.

Approved Market B - northern New South Wales

Approved Market B saw a shift away from traditional viewing areas based around what were previously monopoly stations. There was some variation in the way stations divided the region for the purposes of news. The big winner was the Gold Coast, which by 1997 had its own half-hour local news on Prime, and a local news produced by QTQ Brisbane. The loser was the Coffs Harbour area, which was no longer a news centre in its own right.

Newcastle viewing area (figure 11)

NBN was one of the truly strong incumbents at the start of aggregation, and continued its domination in the area of news, not only in its Newcastle base, but increasingly in its new viewing areas. This position was built up over thirty years, with the station continually introducing technology and expertise to enhance its news performance:

NBN 3 continues to be the only Commercial Television Station outside of the capital cities to originate its own news services. [NBN Annual Report 1975]

Like CTC in Canberra, prior to aggregation NBN presented an integrated bulletin in its incumbent viewing area. This formula had worked successfully since its early days on air:

The acquisition of PMG relay facilities from Sydney has enabled us to receive overseas and Commonwealth news stories within the same deadlines as Sydney stations. In keeping with our local image, NBN 3 includes these stories within the news service in positions graded according to the relative importance of the overseas, Australian and local news each day. [NBN Annual Report 1969]

With the onset of competition in Newcastle, NBN had the advantage of previous experience, as the station had always competed against the Sydney stations which reached approximately 50 per cent of its market. It simply stuck to its winning formula, and expanded into its three other viewing areas - Forster-Taree to Grafton, Grafton north to the Gold Coast, and Tamworth-Armidale-Glen Innes-Tenterfield - through the inclusion of pre-recorded local windows in its main bulletin. Out of Newcastle, it also generated a half hour local news at 10.30pm comprising the best stories of the day from around the expanded region, and a half hour news on Saturday and Sunday, integrated with national news, and with local windows to its other viewing areas.

During daylight saving, NBN had the ability to generate a separate bulletin to the Gold Coast area an hour later than its other services, and had the flexibility to go to windows at any time during its bulletin. Usually this amounted to three times, in news, sport and weather, although it was possible for the station to generate separate headlines to a particular region.

Prime initially presented a five-minute Newcastle bulletin at the end of Seven's news at approximately 6.25pm, the *Newcastle Herald* noting the station's emphasis on personality:

Although only five minutes long, the Prime Newcastle news will be the station's most important 'local' feature and former Newcastle radio

journalist Garry Blair, who will anchor the bulletin, has been practising with his autocue for most of this week for his first appearance tonight as the “face of Prime in Newcastle”. [NH 1/1/92, 4]

The Prime bulletin was later extended to a half-hour local news service, but struggled against such a strong competitor as NBN. With the introduction of aggregation, NRTV established a bureau in Newcastle consisting of a journalist and camera operator, and began broadcasting an hour-long integrated regional service to Newcastle from its Coffs Harbour base - in fact before aggregation, Northern Rivers news staff had visited NBN to get advice on how such a service could be achieved. NRTV’s senior management conceded they would have a hard battle in attracting NBN viewers to their news service:

The station manager of NRTV, Mr John Davis, said that from December 31 NRTV would offer Hunter viewers a “northern NSW news service” but find it difficult to lure away NBN’s big news audience. “I would suggest that NBN would continue to dominate in its own market,” Mr Davis said. [NH 11/12/91, 1]

NRTV’s Newcastle venture was short-lived. The bureau was closed and NRTV viewers in the Hunter area continued to be shown the Coffs Harbour-based news service, minus local content from Newcastle. Former NRTV employee Michael O’Grady recalled:

They more or less threw their hands up and said “we don’t need Newcastle”, and they didn’t do any Newcastle news at all. They more or less said “it’s no good competing with NBN”. [O’Grady 1996, 3]

NRTV, which became Ten, continued to broadcast its Coffs Harbour-based bulletin in Newcastle until 1995, when the decision was taken to axe the bulletin.

North Coast viewing areas (Taree to Queensland border) (figure 12)

Before aggregation, Coffs Harbour was a “television town” in its own right; it had its own local station and a local news. The NRTV bulletin, which covered up to Lismore, had developed from a ten-minute “rip and read” service before the advent of colour, to a half hour bulletin supported by crews based in both regional centres and a number of stringers in outlying areas. According to O’Grady, what the bulletin lacked in sophistication it made up for in local appeal, with stories often running more than three minutes long:

It rated; there was no competition. People wanted to see it. If it was something to do with their area, they'd watch it. They didn't know any different; they liked the long stories because it told them a bit more about the issue. [O'Grady 1996, 2]

However, aggregation would mean major changes in the way Coffs Harbour people were presented with their local news, with NRTV moving to an hour-long integrated format like its rival NBN. Unlike NBN however, Northern Rivers did not attempt to introduce local windows into its integrated bulletin. Instead, stories produced by its Newcastle bureau were shown around the region including the Coffs Harbour/Lismore viewing area which had previously enjoyed its own local news:

People in Coffs went from having a half-hour local news to an hour integrated, incorporating regional stories. They actually got less local content, depending on what the national bulletin was like. [O'Grady 1996, 3]

At the same time, NBN established bureaus in Coffs Harbour, Lismore, Port Macquarie and Taree. Coffs Harbour was included in its Forster-Taree-Grafton windows, and Lismore in its northern windows. The NBN philosophy was that stories always had to be relevant to the local area, and the station worked hard to avoid the "regionalisation" of stories so common in other aggregated news services. The result was that within a few years, NBN was threatening to out-rate NRTV on its home ground. According to O'Grady, the Northern Rivers station persevered with the hour integrated service for a couple of years:

It worked all right, it was only the money spinners that said it wasn't working. It was still the highest rating news there [Coffs Harbour], it was beating NBN but only just. [O'Grady 1996, 3]

The decision came to close the Newcastle bureau, and in 1995, to axe the Ten local news service altogether. O'Grady recalled that "they just called a meeting, called everybody in there and sacked them on the spot. We didn't even have a bulletin that night." Approximately ten staff lost their jobs.

Before aggregation, Prime covered the Taree/Port Macquarie area as part of its Tamworth bulletin. However, with the viewing area extended up the coast to take in

Lismore, and further north over the Queensland border, the station first introduced a coastal window into its Tamworth bulletin, and eventually a separate half-hour coastal bulletin covering the region from Taree to Lismore. Journalists were spread across bureaus in Lismore, Coffs Harbour, Port Macquarie and Taree, with stories shot and edited at the bureau and fed to Tamworth for the bulletin, broadcast live at 6pm.

By 1997, Coffs Harbour viewers had the choice of an hour-long integrated bulletin out of Newcastle with local windows, or inclusion of some local stories in a half-hour coastal news from Prime. In the past, while NRTV's Coffs Harbour bulletin covered a wide geographical area, there was a natural concentration on the town itself because of the location of the station. Now, with the establishment of bureaus by both NBN and Prime and the axing of the NRTV/Ten service, Coffs Harbour in effect had to compete with other parts of the region for a share of stories in the news bulletin. By the same token, that could mean a heavy coverage of the area if it happened that a number of newsworthy events occurred there in one day, and advertising interest could also inject a more local flavour.

On the following pages are the rundowns for Prime and NBN for 13 January 1997. It can be seen that both bulletins contained stories from across a wide geographical area, but by virtue of its windows allowing a concentration of local stories to a particular area, the NBN bulletin had a slightly stronger emphasis on the Coffs Harbour region in its local segments. The Prime bulletin contained a number of stories from Taree, but the NBN bulletin also included Taree stories in its sport segments. NBN was able to include at least one national story with an introduction custom-written for a local audience, for example a story on a national campaign to lower the road toll mentioned the "mid north coast" in the reader's introduction. Commercials on both stations also covered a wide area, although there was an emphasis on Coffs Harbour businesses. The NBN weather segment covered a far wider area than the Prime bulletin, which was able to focus on the mid north and far north coasts.

| PRIME BULLETIN |
|--|
| 1. Woman winched from Port Macquarie beach |
| 2. Solitary Island marine Park protest (Coffs Harbour) |
| 3. Boating mishap at Laurieton |
| 4. Bulahdelah timber supply agreement |
| 5. Road toll; names released of accident victims near Coffs Harbour |
| 6. Man charged after police chase at Woolgoolga READ |
| 7. Lottery winner from Byron Bay |
| Commercial break; Coffs Harbour housing estate, Tinks store at Macksville and Urunga, Coffs Harbour Toyota, Coffs Harbour Health Club, Bob Jane T-Mart |
| 8. Blowhole rescue Port Macquarie |
| 9. Man charged with Fingle murder in court READ |
| 10. Coffs Harbour storm victims |
| 11. Volunteers in policing program at Taree |
| 12. Annual Brunswick Heads fish and chips festival RVO |
| 13. Lismore annual car show |
| Commercial break; Gold Coast horse racing, Hogs Breath Cafe Coffs Harbour, Coffs Harbour Hyundai, Max Murray furniture sale Coffs Harbour |
| 14. Rhythmic gymnastics camp at Kempsey (featuring “gymnasts from the Hunter to the far north coast”) |
| 15. Lismore speedway |
| 16. Horse racing at Taree |
| Commercial break; Coffs Harbour Promenade, FDBs Gardening Store Max Murray Coffs Harbour, Coffs Harbour Hoey Moey |
| 17. Weather; covering Ballina, Byron Bay, Casino, Coffs Harbour, Forster, Gloucester, Grafton, Kempsey, Lismore, Murwillumbah, Port Macquarie, Taree, Tenterfield and Yamba. Forecasts given for mid north coast and far north coast |
| 18. Port Macquarie art exhibition |

| |
|---|
| NBN BULLETIN (with Forster-Taree-Grafton window): |
| 1. Tony Bullimore arrival in Fremantle - TCN |
| 2. Raphael Dinelli visit to Canberra RVO - TCN |
| START OF WINDOW: |
| 3. Coffs Harbour accident victims RVO |
| 4. Port Macquarie police investigate Laurieton holdup RVO |
| 5. Solitary Islands protest (Coffs Harbour) |
| 6. Coffs Harbour Stage 2 of Education Campus |
| 7. Grafton timber supply agreement RVO |
| 8. Review of HSC; city students dominated country cousins |
| Commercial break; 40 Winks (generic), Cleavers Tyres Taree Wingham and Port Macquarie, Surf Shop Forster Taree and Port Macquarie, Dave's Steakhouse Coffs Harbour, Toni Childs album (gen.) |
| 9. Port Macquarie rescue |
| 10. Rescue at Miners Beach Port Macquarie |
| 11. Man charged over drug haul - TCN |
| 12. Man in court over Fingle murder RVO |
| 13. Bill Bayeh in court - TCN |
| Commercial break; Cape Byron ice cream, Holden Network Q (lists local dealers), Portholes Restaurant Coffs Harbour, Coastline Credit Union |
| 14. Mid north coast targeted to lower road toll - TCN story with introduction re-written for local audience |
| 15. Newcastle accident survivor leaves hospital - from NBN Newcastle |
| 16. Victorian Satanic mystery - GTV 9 |
| 17. Packer casino takeover - TCN |
| 18. Middle East peace deal - TCN |
| Commercial break; Harvey Norman (local stories listed), Executive Pools (local suppliers listed), Lightning Ridge Heritage Park, Taree RSL, Northern Rivers Fishermen's Co-Op |
| 19. Italy train crash - TCN |
| 20. Clinton sex case - TCN story with special "NBN" sign-off |
| 21. Stock report |
| 22. Cranes on Sydney Harbour Bridge to be replaced RVO - TCN |
| Commercial break; Fuji film (generic), GIO Insurance, Honey Place Urunga, Crystal Waters Estate near Coffs Harbour |
| 23. Balloon attempt failed - TCN |
| 24. Flamenco guitarist in Newcastle - NBN Newcastle |
| THROW TO SPORT |
| 25. Australian Tennis Open - TCN |
| 26. American super bowl-Golf wrap - TCN |
| 27. Racing at Taree |
| 28. Cessnock racing tips |
| Commercial break; Greater Newcastle Building Society, Ford clearance (generic), Mars Bar, Just Golf Coffs Harbour, Wynns car products (generic) |
| 29. Cricket; Australia v West Indies - TCN |
| 30. Taree sailing RVO |
| 31. Ten pin bowler from Port Macquarie |
| THROW BACK TO NEWS |
| 32. Coffs Harbour tourist attraction plans |
| 33. Weather, covering Gold Coast, Murwillumbah, Lismore, Casino, Ballina, Yamba, Grafton, Coffs Harbour, Kempsey, Port Macquarie, Taree, Gloucester, Armidale, Glen Innes, Inverell, Tenterfield |
| Forecasts given for northern tablelands, northern rivers, mid north coast and far north coast. |
| Commercial break; Big Rooster, Oz Lotto, Cash Converters Coffs Harbour and Port Macquarie, Timeless Patchwork Port Macquarie |
| 34. Gypsy music at Sydney festival - TCN |

Prime also introduced a separate half-hour local news generated out of the Gold Coast and based at Southport, with the coverage area stopping at the New South Wales border. The service began as a series of news updates, and developed into a full half-hour service live at six o'clock from November 1993, staffed by five journalists. Channel 7's Gold Coast bureau operated from the same building, but the services were run separately.

By 1997, the Gold Coast service was competing directly with a unique service operated by Channel 9; a half-hour local service operated by a metropolitan station, outside a metropolitan area. The bulletin went to air at 5.30pm, followed by QTQ's Brisbane-based service at 6pm. Indicative of QTQ's competitive approach to the Gold Coast service was the fact that the station refused to disclose any information for the purposes of this research, on the grounds that "they could be talking to anyone." QTQ's Internet site was a little more informative:

Our commitment to quality news broadcasting has expanded to provide Gold Coast viewers with the most comprehensive news coverage of Australia's fastest growing region. [April 1997]

The Gold Coast, like the Illawarra and central coast areas of New South Wales, experienced an overlapping of regional and metropolitan television services. Viewers were able to see the channels broadcasting out of Brisbane, and also stations in Approved Market B broadcasting to the northern New South Wales coast. In fact on the central coast and Gold Coast, the wealth of available viewing meant that the "spare" or "sixth" channel available in other areas for a future additional service, was already taken up. According to the ABA:

In these places, the metropolitan stations' licence areas overlap with the adjacent regional stations' licence areas, and for that reason, eight services are already being transmitted. This has used up the available capacity to match the current terrestrial coverage. [ABA news release, 13/11/96]

B & T Weekly reported that some regional areas such as the Gold Coast were actually "over-serviced by television." [19/4/96, 33] NBN said its research indicated a strong audience on the Gold Coast, probably due to the large

population of retirees from New South Wales who preferred to see news based on Sydney and their home state rather than stories from Brisbane. The station was a sponsor of the Gold Coast Chargers rugby league team and also received requests for its news presenters to make publicity appearances in the area. However, NBN chose not to cover many stories north of the border, while QTQ did not venture very far south. The two stations frequently swapped stories, and NBN was able to make use of a stringer on the Gold Coast or send its Lismore crew northward on a day trip if necessary.

Tamworth viewing area (figure 13)

Prime, the incumbent in Tamworth, maintained a half hour local bulletin for the northern inland area, staffed by seven journalists. The effect of aggregation was to make the Tamworth bulletin more local, as previously it included stories from the northern New South Wales coast which were later contained in the station's separate coastal news. The company established a bureau at Moree staffed by one journalist and a camera operator, where previously the area had been serviced by a stringer. The bulletin was pre-recorded in the Tamworth studio at 5.20pm, to allow for the live coastal bulletin at six. For a short time in 1997, the station also pre-recorded its Newcastle news out of Tamworth, while the Newcastle newsroom moved into new premises.

NBN quickly established a bureau in Tamworth and stringers in Narrabri and Armidale and, according to its management, posed a significant threat to Prime, winning the news timeslot on some nights. NRTV did not consider it worthwhile to establish a bureau in Tamworth to feed its ill-fated hour-long regional integrated bulletin, but relied on a stringer to supply its Tamworth material.

Approved Market D - Victoria

Ballarat viewing area (figure 14)

The incumbent in Ballarat was BTV, which, along with GMV Shepparton had become VIC-TV, and later part of the WIN network. Before aggregation the station presented a half hour of local news at 6pm. In the early days of aggregation in Victoria, VIC maintained its half hour local Ballarat news, and generated pre-recorded news bulletins out of Ballarat for Bendigo and Gippsland. This was eventually cut to one regional bulletin encompassing all three areas. In 1993, the format was changed to a 5.30 regional statewide bulletin, before moving back to a half hour of local news in 1994.

VIC/WIN's competitors in the Ballarat viewing area, Southern Cross [Ten Victoria] and Prime, did not make a concerted effort to establish a local news presence. Southern Cross concentrated on its own incumbent areas, and Prime introduced three thirty-second newbreaks a day, pre-recorded at 5pm and replayed at 7.30pm, 8.30pm and 10pm. This service was axed in 1995. According to a former Prime Ballarat employee responding to the survey of News Editors:

With such a minimum output there was no competition for the 30-minute service put out by WIN-TV, and Prime in Victoria was not committed to local news. [May 1996]

Bendigo viewing area (figure 15)

In Bendigo, the incumbent, Southern Cross, maintained the half hour local news service it successfully presented in the lead-up to aggregation. However, with the introduction of a service by WIN, Southern Cross began to feel the financial pressure of generating local news in a competitive market. According to Southern Cross General Manager Mark Colson:

VIC [WIN] seemed to have a policy of putting news services in every market, and decided to compete head-on in every market. News costs a hell of a lot of money. [Colson 1996, 2]

Southern Cross moved to an hour-long integrated news service in the hope of better competing with its new rival. However, faced with relatively weak ratings from Ten programming, and Ten's decision to change its news to a 5pm timeslot, the decision was

taken in 1994 to pull out of local news in Victoria. Colson argued that Southern Cross had no say, and was caught in the crossfire:

We weren't winning the timeslot. We tried a one-hour compiled local-national-international service. It still didn't work. We couldn't get the right formula. [Colson 1996, 2]

WIN's viewers in Bendigo saw a half-hour local bulletin at 6pm, which changed to the 5.30pm statewide bulletin in 1993, and then back to a local bulletin. As in Ballarat, Prime introduced newsbreaks into the Bendigo viewing area when aggregation commenced, only to axe them in 1995.

Shepparton viewing area (figure 16)

Developments in local news in Shepparton mirrored those of Ballarat; the incumbent, VIC, continued the local news service it provided before aggregation, then switched to a statewide bulletin in 1993, before changing back to a half-hour local bulletin. Southern Cross did not provide news in the area, and Prime introduced newsbreaks in 1992, ceasing them in 1995.

Albury viewing area (figure 17)

Albury was the one Victorian viewing area in which Prime maintained a strong local news presence. As the incumbent, Prime continued to present a half hour of local news after aggregation, and until 1996 had little competition from the new players in the state. For a short time, VIC presented a pre-recorded Albury bulletin from Shepparton, and this later became a regional bulletin. In May 1996, WIN established a half-hour local news service in the Albury viewing area to go head-to-head with Prime. Geographically, the Albury news service, based on the New South Wales/Victorian border, could benefit from the input of stories from nearby Wagga in south western New South Wales. However, WIN did not establish links between the two stations. Any swapping of stories had to occur by crews meeting halfway between the two cities and physically exchanging tapes. Southern Cross did not attempt to provide local news in Albury.

Gippsland viewing area (figure 18)

Development of news services in the Gippsland area was identical to that in Bendigo, with the incumbent, Southern Cross, continuing a half-hour local news service before changing to an hour-long integrated bulletin and ultimately axing its local news. As it did in other Victorian viewing areas, VIC made a number of changes before settling on a half-hour local news service for the viewing area. Prime presented newsbreaks to Gippsland until 1995.

Tasmania (figure 19)

While not part of the four Approved Markets, Tasmania also experienced changes in local news as a result of aggregation. These development are not easily compared to those in regions of other states. Tasmanian viewers were used to seeing their own state-based half-hour bulletin at 6.30pm, integrating local news with national and international stories. Aggregation brought two competing services, both continuing the half-hour integrated tradition.

WIN Tasmania, formerly ENT Limited and based in Hobart, established a news bureau in Burnie and Launceston, feeding stories into Hobart for a “northern” window of up to three items a night. The window was generally run after the first break in the integrated bulletin. The state-based nature of the bulletin gave WIN little scope to copy the news format presented in its other regions; half-hour local news followed by half-hour national news, as any separate half-hour national bulletin would have to come from another state and thus be largely irrelevant to a Tasmanian audience.

Southern Cross, the owner of TVT Launceston, had previously been able to exchange stories with the Hobart service; in effect one service covered the north, and the other the south of the state. After aggregation, the station opened an office in Hobart staffed by five journalists, basing one reporter in Devonport and retaining four journalists in Launceston. Stories were edited at the bureaus and fed to Launceston for broadcast. Because Southern Cross in Tasmania was affiliated with both the Seven and Ten

networks, its news had access to stories from both stations. However, it primarily took Ten stories because logistically it was easier to do so. Ten's mainland bulletins were broadcast at 5pm, an hour earlier than Seven's. Therefore its completed news stories were ready for transfer to the Tasmanian newsroom well in time for the Southern Cross bulletin. The integrated format had always meant difficulty in being able to fit sufficient local, national and international news into half an hour. The station considered expanding to an hour like the NBN service, but ruled it out on the basis of cost. In 1996, Southern Cross moved its news to a 6pm timeslot; Tasmanian viewers then had a choice of bulletins with Southern Cross at six, WIN at 6.30, and the ABC at 7pm. All stations provided a weekend service.

Summary

Clearly, the implementation of aggregation brought dramatic changes to the structure of regional news services with expansion in some areas and the axing of bulletins in others. Based on the ratings success of local news in their incumbent markets, many station operators saw the provision of news bulletins as a way of attracting viewers in their newly-aggregated markets. At the same time, cost-cutting within stations brought about by the financial demands of trebling services, made it increasingly difficult to sustain quality news services. The result was a period of upheaval for those working in aggregated newsrooms.

Within the news services able to continue, the policy had a heavy influence on how journalists went about their work as the following chapter explains.

CHAPTER FOUR: EFFECTS OF THE EQUALISATION POLICY ON THE PRACTICE OF JOURNALISM

Localism

Analysing the development or demise of various news services occurring in aggregated areas of Australia, it is evident that equalisation significantly reduced the *localism* of news services. This occurred in various ways:

- the reduction in services to particular areas because of the aggregation structure
- the axing of bulletins for economic reasons
- the introduction of stories from the wider market into viewing areas which previously had their own parochial services,
- a greater emphasis on pre-recording news, necessitating early deadlines
- the tendency for bulletins to be produced “from a distance” rather than from within the local area.

To assess such a reduction it is necessary to first examine the concept of localism in regional television in Australia, and within that context, the importance of news as an element of local programming.

The Oswin report had supported a definition of localism put forward by Regional Television Australia, which related it to:

. . . these elements of regional station programming, advertising, community services and other activities, which originate within its service area and are intended uniquely for its service area. [Oswin 1984, 170]

Regional Television Australia had also acknowledged that “localism” could have varying meanings, ranging from material generating from small communities to larger regions and cities. The Federation of Australian Commercial Television Stations [FACTS] put forward a different definition, grading “localism” into several tiers:

- *national* [“Australian programs produced for the national market as a whole” - Oswin 1984, 168]
- *regional* [relating to areas where each television station “covers a relatively large

geographical area within which there can be divergent communities of interest”, for example CTC 7 with its combination of metropolitan and rural populations - 1984, 168]

- *urban and rural* [“the discrete areas which make up a region” – 169]
- *local vicinity* and *self interest* [the domain of non-metropolitan stations where, according to FACTS, “a virtual personal involvement by ‘the local station’ is an expectation of the . . . audience: an expectation engendered by many pre-television years of ‘local’ radio station involvement in community affairs, and by government pronouncements on the essentiality of local program control and the provision of a comprehensive service to the community to be served.” - 1984, 170]

Before aggregation, most local stations tended to position themselves in the “urban and rural” and “local vicinity and self interest” tiers. The implementation of the policy saw them move towards the “regional” tier as they began broadcasting to wider areas made up of diverse populations, for example coastal communities, rural areas and major provincial cities. Stations such as Prime and WIN moved into what could be described as a new “regional network” tier, developing into networks in their own right through ownership changes and acquisitions. They covered extremely large geographic areas across state borders and produced some generic programs for a wide range of local audiences. [East archive, notes February 1991]

The Senate Select Committee had highlighted the importance of localism as one of the main themes underlying the purpose of Australian legislation, policy and planning associated with broadcasting over many decades. It pointed out, however, that the concept “cannot be easily defined.” [Senate Select Committee 1987, 145] After considering Oswin’s interpretation, it put forward its own definition of localism in television broadcasting as referring to:

. . . locally produced programs which are designed to meet the needs of particular local communities; locally originated programs (ie those to

which local stations purchase rights); local ownership and control, and local advertising. [1987, 145-6]

It added that the concept of localism included support for local institutions and causes, however, in practice, local programs were predominantly regional news and interviews and major regional events. Such events included sporting grand finals, opening ceremonies of major facilities, and large concerts.

From the earliest discussion of equalisation, concern was expressed from various quarters about the possible impact on localism. The Senate Select Committee took a number of submissions on the issue, including reports from the Media and Communications Council, NBN, and Northern Star Holdings. [1987, 149] However, the Committee was of the view that equalisation might lead to even more local programming:

If the demand for local programming is as strong as the regional licensees claim, the introduction of competitive services may even increase the degree of local programming. [155]

Based on United States experience, where new stations tried to win viewers through local news programs, a station in Canberra extending into Wagga Wagga, Wollongong, Bathurst and Orange would be anxious to show that it was aware of local issues and developments:

Consequently, the television coverage of major regional events is likely to continue, for the same competitive reasons. [150]

In hindsight, this view can be seen as rather naive, with little regard for the economic implications of duplicating services across so many centres.

Few disputed the merits of the localism concept in the operation of regional television prior to aggregation. However, in reality, localism had already been eroded for economic reasons, leading to networking among regional stations and dependence on the major metropolitan networks. Oswin had reported that this stemmed from the original licensing decision in the early 1960s, which allowed the establishment of a relatively large number of regional stations. The report argued that this, coupled with the continued

encouragement of Australian content in television programs, led to the inevitable growth of networks for the purpose of acquisition and distribution of programs. That predicated the development of an industry structure in which the major networks were seen to be in a position of “substantial economic strength vis-a-vis the non-network stations.” [Oswin 1984, 151]

It seemed clear that, with the best of intentions on the part of licensees, television had not developed in the manner which was intended in the original licensing, that is, along the same paths as regional radio. Oswin concluded that television “does not exhibit the same form and degree of independent operation found in radio.” [1984, 153]

Notwithstanding all the obstacles to providing substantial local product, the regional licensees demonstrably exhibited as much of a local focus as possible. Some of this was due to regulation; by law stations had to show programs which were interesting and relevant to their particular community, “including a degree of locally produced material.” [1984, 167] This was part of their requirement to provide an adequate and comprehensive service, and they were assessed by the ABT for their licence renewals. But, as already documented, regional stations often went further than these requirements. They were also considered to be a vital element of their local area, providing a sounding board and a voice to regional communities and retaining a flavour unique to their individual region. Oswin noted that while television had not developed the local flavour of radio, “a strong (but obviously not total) form of station independence still exists in commercial television” and concluded that while the major networks were still the main sources of programs, stations had substantially preserved their independence and autonomy by, except on rare occasions, “maintaining control over individual programming and advertising decisions.” [1984, 154] This was done through their ability to select programs from both the metropolitan networks and other sources, by scheduling programs at different times to the metropolitan stations and selling and scheduling their own advertising. An example of commitment to localism came from NBN:

The recent purchase of an outside broadcast unit will enable the Station to increase and improve its cover of local special events and local sport. This will be a significant addition to essential local programming in which NBN 3 has always been active. [NBN Annual Report 1967}

The station's community services officer described the extent of NBN's donations and contributions to local groups:

. . .and all because NBN believes in the Hunter Region. . .believes in its citizens, its industry, its way of life, and because we have faith in the future it all promises. [NBN Annual Report 1967]

The Oswin review received a number of submissions from regional stations maintaining their emphasis on local autonomy. Mackay Television contended that it was not bound by any programming commitment, and that each available program was considered on its merits for purchase by the station with the main consideration being that "it will be well received locally." It noted that quite apart from any obligations under the Act:

. . .a station had to be locally operated if it was. . .to maintain an involvement in the business, social and community life of its service area. These objectives are more easily fulfilled if the day-to-day control of station operation is undertaken by local management. [Oswin 1984, 155-6]

The report identified five elements which added up to *localism* in programming:

- the program format itself
- production of local programs such as news, children's programs and entertainment shows
- provision of local advertising
- community service such as the encouragement and coverage of public events
- local employment.

Regional stations were "unanimous in the high value they placed on these activities," a view shared by "an overwhelming number of town and shire councils and individuals" in regard to local programming. [Oswin 1984, 173-4]

Of the various types of local programming, the bulk was considered to be made up of "local news, community announcements and local sport" [Senate Select Committee

1987, 149] Of these categories, news was described as “the aspect of local programming perceived as the most important by regional viewers” and “central to localism.” [Oswin 1984, 184, 248] The Senate Committee said local news was “particularly valued in the regional communities”, and cited RTA figures which showed “regional news services match or exceed the ratings achieved by relayed network news services, and outrate the Australian Broadcasting Corporation news services by approximately two to one.” [Senate Select Committee 1987, 146]

The Oswin review cited numerous submissions from regional stations and other organisations highlighting the importance of local news. RTA submitted that the social impact of local news and public affairs programs (such as morning “chat” shows and weekend magazine-style programs) in regional areas went beyond rendering the public better informed:

It includes the encouragement of a local and regional spirit and sense of identity and on particular issues, the development of a local and regional will. [Oswin 1984, 185]

Northern Rivers Television described its news as “probably the most visible form of localism”, containing a high level of public involvement and developing into something of a “conscience” for the North Coast:

Only a local news bulletin, which has the confidence and support of the general public, can achieve these goals, and the staff of [Channel] 11/8 news is justly proud of the role it plays in community affairs, acting as a voice for all individuals and groups. [1984, 185-6]

Research reported by Southern Cross quoted regional respondents:

TV is their window on their local world. TV provides the local news, the local items, and keeps them in touch with the local area, which appears to be largely ignored by Network TV channels. [188]

BTV Ballarat saw local news as frequently the top rating program for a regional television station and almost consistently appearing in the top five. The Oswin Review noted that as well as the submissions from within the regional television industry, “many submissions from private individuals also mentioned the benefit to the community of the local news.” [186-7]

The review showed the range of regional television resources dedicated to local news, from CTC Canberra and NBN Newcastle with comprehensive services throughout the day and half-hour bulletins on both Saturday and Sunday, to SES Mount Gambier with a regional half-hour bulletin on weekdays and a ten-minute weekend news magazine. It also acknowledged that, like local programming in general, local news specifically was regarded by the ABT as part of a licensee's obligation under the Broadcasting and Television Act. The report cited a case where a station with no local news had its licence renewed, but the ABT "made it clear that it considered that local news was an essential component of an adequate television service." [Oswin 1984, 188, 190-1]

The review aside, there was considerable debate over whether localism, and news as a local program, was as important as it was made out to be in the stations' submissions. The News Director of NBN, Jim Sullivan, firmly believed it was, and cited as proof an example within his own station when a decision was made in 1995 to launch a half-hour late evening bulletin encompassing stories from around the aggregated NBN viewing area. The program replaced Channel 9's *Nightline* in the daily NBN schedule. Sullivan said that at the time the late night news bulletins originating from the three metropolitan networks and shown on their three regional affiliates, were very close in ratings.

When we replaced *Nightline* we doubled the ratings. Viewers were more interested in seeing stories from say, the north coast, than Adelaide or Perth. [Sullivan 1996, 2]

Peter Andren, formerly of Prime Orange, pointed out that after Prime changed its news to 5.30pm in 1996 and plummeted in the ratings, it returned to the 6pm timeslot and virtually the same audience it enjoyed before the change. At the same time its competitor, WIN, was broadcasting a regional bulletin combining the Orange viewing area with other parts of the wider market and was unable to woo Prime viewers once the local bulletin returned to 6pm:

They'll watch the news they feel most comfortable with and they've gone back in droves to Prime. They've always seen that as their tradition, because it's basically been fairly "parish pump". [Andren 1996, 3]

Capital's Ken Begg believed local news was "critically important." He said that applied equally to the capital cities, with their own parochial stories taking precedence over news from other areas. "So no matter where you are the local thing is important. You've got to look after your backyard." [Begg 1996, 5]

A further argument was that the introduction of more and more news programs emphasising a national or global perspective only served to heighten viewers' demand for equivalent local news. This was demonstrated with the advent of CNN in America, as Doyle pointed out:

CNN changed forever the landscape of electronic news. . . No one was predicting that CNN would put any of the world's local news broadcasters out of business. If anything, CNN makes local news broadcasters more valuable to their audiences. Once viewers see the coverage of world events through CNN's electronic window, they are hungry to learn how those events relate to them directly. They depend on their local news broadcasters to bring CNN's global coverage into direct focus. [1992, 84]

Other American research suggested a similar desire for localism in news bulletins, with a 1988 study showing that national news on CBS, ABC and NBC reached a total of approximately 47 million viewers per night. The combined viewing audience of local television bulletins was an estimated 80 million:

National samples of American metropolitan areas indicate local news may far outstrip the popularity of network newscasts. . . Although the expansion of cable channels has contributed to a decline of about a third in the audience for news from CBS, NBC and ABC, local newscast viewership has remained robust, perhaps because cable rarely offers its own local reporting. [McManus 1994, 10]

Others believed that even though the viewers themselves said they wanted to see news about their own area, their actions belied that wish. It could be argued that the relatively lukewarm viewer reaction when various news services were reduced or cancelled under aggregation, was proof that the public was ambivalent about localism on television. When Northern Rivers ceased its news services, including in its original market of Coffs Harbour, there were initial complaints from the local community:

The normally laid-back residents of the NSW North Coast are up in arms about regional channel Ten Northern NSW axing its local news service. Grafton mayor Bruce Sahlqvist is leading a campaign to boycott Ten Northern NSW since the local news service was cancelled. . . "If Channel 10 isn't loyal to the North Coast, why should the North Coast be loyal to Channel 10?" [*Sun-Herald* 9/7/95, 134]

However, the outrage faded away. According to former Northern Rivers employee Michael O'Grady:

They were talking about pulling their advertising and all that sort of stuff, but it's like anything, they forget after a while. Ten news from Sydney is now rating as well as Northern Rivers was then. It took a while to turn around, but eventually people forget. There are no loyalties. [O'Grady 1996, 3]

O'Grady added that while there was talk about a loss of localism at the start of aggregation, viewers later comfortably referred to the channels they watched by the names of their metropolitan affiliates:

They don't say "we're watching Prime", they say "we're watching Seven". In Coffs Harbour they'll say "we're watching Nine", not NBN. All they talk about is the nationals. [1996, 4]

Mark Colson of Southern Cross said of his station's experience in Tasmania, localism proved to be surprisingly unpopular after aggregation. When viewers watched a locally-produced football broadcast, they expected the same production standards as those displayed on national programs, and they were disappointed. "I do find that as much as people say 'I wish I had that local show', they'd prefer to watch the other," Colson said. A weekly daytime variety show on Southern Cross rated well before aggregation, but suffered when other choices came along:

After aggregation, it was competing against a national show and struggled tremendously. We replaced it with a national show and the ratings picked up. Locals can say "I wish I had it", but they didn't watch it. [Colson 1996, 2]

According to WIN's Peter Gough, viewer loyalty to their "home" station became a thing of the past:

In the old days with a TV set it was a hassle to change the channel, and a station did tend to get locked in for the night.. Now station loyalty's

nothing. I think it mattered for a while, but I suspect it matters less as time goes on. [Gough 1996, 11]

He cited further proof that localism was perhaps over-rated, in the viewing habits of Mount Gambier residents in South Australia. They had access to a local monopoly station, but a large number chose to watch aggregated services from across the border in Victoria, preferring the greater choice of programs even though any local content had little relevance, and even the national news was Melbourne-based rather than Adelaide-based. Another factor was that due to the time difference between Victoria and South Australia, they were able to see programs half an hour earlier by tuning in across the border: "So there's a fair bit of fortuitous viewing, a fair bit of action across the border. From a social point of view it's very interesting." [1996, 4]

Andren said that even if they regretted any reduction in localism, battle-weary regional viewers had become resigned to the loss of services in their area, and local television programs were just one of a long list. When aggregation came to the west of New South Wales, there was strong reaction when Prime dropped long-running local programs like *Focus* - a news magazine shown before *Sixty Minutes* - and *Rural Roundup*, but the protests did not last:

I think it shows that people just get so cynical and so fed up, and they see it in the same way as the diminution of services from government or banks or whatever. They see it as Sydney calling the shots. [Andren 1996, 4]

In areas not yet touched by aggregation, viewers seemed unconcerned about any potential reduction in localism of services. Green reported a study on local programming and equalisation in Western Australia finding that when given a choice between the same television service as Perth or local programs and less choice, the vast majority of regional respondents chose the Perth service. The respondents expressed that local weather and local programs were important, but any reduction in such programming through equalisation was a price worth paying for greater choice of television channels:

It can be confidently argued that the desired option is a metropolitan service adapted to include information important to regional viewers. The policy of regional equalisation is endorsed by the respondents. Local

programming is rated highly but is chosen to be (generally), either statewide or regional in scope. There is little demand for shire- or town-based programming so long as more widely defined local programs cover a cross-section of concerns. . . The policy of regional equalisation - even if it results in the relaying of metropolitan stations - is roundly endorsed by the people affected. [1988, 7, 43]

It could also be argued that any local loyalty to television services was based on a policy-driven phenomenon which could be changed over time; that loyalty to a particular region was simply a matter of habit, which could be re-adjusted to the new aggregated region. In many regions, local loyalty was founded on artificial geographical boundaries dictated by the available television signal, rather than any deep-seated affiliations with a particular area. Pre-aggregation, the town of Young was considered to have an affiliation with Wagga because residents received the Riverina-based television service, but Orange was considered "outside the region", even though it was a similar distance away. Similarly, viewers in Orange became used to considering Dubbo as part of their television viewing area, because both cities watched the same television channel. According to Andrew Bell, former WIN News Director in western New South Wales:

In fact, thirty years previously there was no community of interest probably between Dubbo and Orange - television has created the market.
[Bell 1996, 1]

As a further example that viewer loyalty could be manufactured, he cited the growth of the Wollongong-based Illawarra Mutual Building Society, which had been "fuelled on the back of a television signal which went first down the south coast of New South Wales, and then into the ACT." [Bell 1996, 1]

Andren agreed the development of regional television created commonality between areas which otherwise would have very little in common:

I think over thirty years those regions, by accident or whatever, had emerged where Cobar and Mudgee and Coonamble and Cowra had things in common, and there was an expectation there. [Andren 1996, 3]

Regardless of whether viewers truly valued localism, there is ample evidence to show that equalisation had a significant effect on the local content of programming generally,

and both the quantity and quality of local content within news bulletins. The effect on news bulletins was directly related to the issue of resources, which will be considered separately. Looking at the issue of localism alone, a number of factors emerge. One was the introduction of stories from the wider aggregated market into local news services, usually as a means of saving money and to bolster services where resources had been cut. Bell argued that this in itself need not be a negative factor; WIN discovered with the introduction of a regional bulletin in western New South Wales, that it was possible to show the same story in more than one news market and still make it relevant and appropriate to each area:

We always felt perhaps in the old days that if a story appeared in both [the central west and Riverina] markets, we were sometimes a bit sheepish about it. But actually what we showed is that there are stories that do travel. [Bell 1996, 3]

Aggregation certainly opened up opportunities for local news services to cover events in neighbouring regions or other states which had direct relevance in their market, for example, the ability to show a sporting event in Canberra which featured a well-known athlete from Shepparton. However, the tendency was to produce “generic” stories with the intention of showing them in multiple markets, when in fact by removing specific local references, their relevance or interest to any viewing area was diminished. This practice will be considered further in Chapter 5.

Such usage, combined with other changes brought about by decreasing resources under aggregation, countered to some extent the benefits achieved by the introduction of new, competing services in a market. For example, by 1996 Wollongong viewers had the choice of two half-hour local services at 6pm on weeknights. However, the local content of both bulletins had been affected by the economic constraints posed by aggregation. Both were operating with fewer staff than the incumbent WIN service had before aggregation, resulting in corner-cutting through longer stories and fewer items in a bulletin, the use of generic stories from outside the viewing area, and a reluctance to send crews long distances to cover items outside the immediate Wollongong vicinity. The latter was particularly applicable to the far south coast area; before aggregation,

WIN crews would frequently travel to the southern extremities of the viewing area and collect stories over several days of shooting, for broadcast in the following weeks. After aggregation, this practice was rarely followed and far south coast viewers had to be content with infrequent, or no, coverage of their area. In addition, Wollongong lost any genuine local news service at weekends; Prime offered no weekend coverage, and WIN began running pre-recorded newsbreaks generated from Canberra, the bulk of them written on the preceding Friday afternoon. [East archive, news rundowns June 1996]

Localism was also eroded by a greater emphasis on pre-recording bulletins, forcing early deadlines and the inability to adequately cover events in the afternoon. In the past, when most local bulletins went to air live at 6pm, it was possible to cover late-breaking stories up until the end of the bulletin, and then to provide live updates during the evening. Under aggregation, bulletins in many regions needed to be finalised as early as 2pm, to allow for feeding and recording time, and late news updates were out of the question because they would disrupt the rigid schedules in place throughout a station's aggregated area. If an event happened at, say 4pm, it might be too late even for mention in a pre-recorded bulletin, and viewers would have to learn about it from other sources and from television coverage 24 hours later.

Another factor to affect the localism of bulletins was the need to consolidate production services in one area, with multiple news bulletins issuing from one locality to markets a long distance away. This meant that the news presenters, and sometimes senior news staff, were located hundreds of kilometres away from the viewing audience they served. Little local knowledge could be applied to stories; names were mispronounced, important issues were missed because their local significance was not understood, and the perception of accountability among news staff was reduced. There was debate over whether viewers knew or indeed cared that this was the case; when WIN introduced its western New South Wales bulletin and produced it in Wollongong, its competitor Prime made much of its own image as "Riverina's news service". Despite that, former WIN newsreader Michelle Larmer, who presented the Wagga bulletin from the Wollongong

studio, recalled a weekend when she travelled to Wagga to attend a function. As she was returning to Wollongong by plane, a woman recognised her and asked, “where are you off to?”, obviously assuming Larmer was based in Wagga. [Larmer 1996, 1] QTV in Queensland, with its short-lived system of five services generating from one studio, received letters from viewers mentioning that they saw the “local” newsreader in their town, when in fact the presenter had not visited the area.

Andren disagreed that viewers did not notice; he believed to present a truly local service a station must have a presenter based in its viewing area:

I think people want to know that their local news is coming, all of it, out of their area, and they want their reader to be across the stories and be able to be authoritative, not only about the story but about the area. [Andren 1996, 5]

Whether viewers could be fooled or not, it is difficult to argue that a news service done from a distance could provide as comprehensive a local coverage as one based in the viewing area. Bell believed that with WIN’s western services, most people probably did not realise they were watching a bulletin from Wollongong. But the service lost out in terms of the local contacts formed from having readers and reporters regularly attending local events:

However experienced you are, if you’re not on the ground for some period of the day, you don’t know what’s going on. . . The first time I ever went to Wagga was to run the newsroom for a week. [Bell 1996, 5]

Absentee news services ran the risk of making a mistake and destroying their credibility without even realising it. WIN’s weather presenter had to ring the Orange and Wagga offices to ask them what the day was like, before writing an introduction to his forecast:

You’ll make a mistake and never know, but of course you lose a viewer or three, and again, you don’t know that because you’re not even standing behind someone in a supermarket queue going “I watched that channel last night and they said this”. I think that anecdotal link with your community is very important and it can’t be overestimated. [Bell 1996, 5]

According to Andren, viewers liked to hear remarks such as, “Hey, I can hear the hail hitting the roof,” or “I just got a call from Cowra and there’s a tree fallen across the road”:

Now you can say that in Wollongong but to know it – it’s just those little pieces that show you’re live and you’re there, and you know what’s happening, and that makes a hell of a difference. [Andren 1996, 5]

Apart from changes within bulletins which eroded localism, by 1996 some areas were receiving less local coverage in terms of air-time, than they were before aggregation. While the larger cities like Canberra, Newcastle and Wollongong experienced an increase in the number of news services, albeit in many cases with a corresponding decrease in true local content for the reasons already discussed, a number of regions, such as Coffs Harbour and Victoria, either gained nothing or lost news services because of the policy. Rayner made an accurate predication in 1987:

Local identification as we’ve known it in the past will be submerged in the practicalities of the new regime. Regional centres who previously boasted their own television centres may find that operators may centre themselves elsewhere in the new markets. [ABT 1987, 53]

Those who strongly supported aggregation argued that no-one lost out in terms of local news as a result of the policy. Colin Knowles of the ABA believed localism “probably increased” through aggregation. Even though there was still only one news service in many areas, there were other local elements including access to more local advertising through three channels instead of one, and viewers had access to other sources of news besides television if they required an alternative presentation. Knowles also dismissed any claim that local news had become more generic because of aggregation:

Television news is extremely superficial anyway. If you were serious about getting information, you’d go elsewhere. [Knowles 1996, 3]

Gough’s view was that every viewer who had a local news before aggregation still had a local news, although it might come from a different station. “So, despite the prophets of doom, one could look at this and say that no regional viewer has lost a local news.” [Gough 1996, 2]

Colson said Southern Cross had no regrets about its decision to shut down its local news services in Victoria; after some initial protests the move did not affect ratings or advertising revenue. The station management took the view that the community had a news service on WIN which was adequate, and thus would not be badly affected by the cutting of the Southern Cross service:

It was a brave move to take away local news in an incumbent market. There are no regrets from the company's point of view, except that some viewers were hurt. The upside has been far greater than any down side. . There's no room for other players in small markets. [Colson 1996, 4]

Similarly, Ten defended its slashing of news services in Queensland and northern New South Wales. The company's Chief Executive Officer, David White said the role local news played in regional stations' strong market position was somewhat debatable: "At the end of the day, everyone makes a commercial decision whether or not local news is a good thing." White reportedly said Ten had not experienced any demand to expand its local news service to compete with WIN's "very aggressive" local news:

I thought aggregation was all about choice. To me, four stations running local news at the same time doesn't offer much choice. [*B & T Weekly* 22/3/96, 26]

In contrast to the soaring popularity enjoyed by many local news bulletins in the days of monopolies, by 1996 ratings for local news in some regions were declining. Begg emphasised how, five years earlier, Capital's local news was the city's number one program:

Now, it's anything but news, and the only news that rates in the top twenty is Channel 9 or Channel 7 - Sydney news bulletins. This town, any town will support their local news if they think it's worthwhile. I think the answer is that the viewers expressed a decision and made their judgement. [Begg 1996, 5]

However, Seven Queensland's David Astley said his station had continued to dominate in news ratings in its incumbent areas:

In the Maryborough/Sunshine Coast and Mackay regions, we have maintained commercial shares for local news in excess of 60 per cent. We have had an on-the-ground presence in those markets for around 30 years and think there is a trust factor there that translates into ratings. [*B & T Weekly* 22/3/96, 26]

While news was considered to be a key element of a station's expression of localism, other local programming was also significantly affected by aggregation. It was true that greater advertising choice became available and businesses could benefit from lower rates due to a competitive sales environment, but stations which were once thriving production houses in their own right became little more than sales offices or "commercial factories". Tight network schedules precluded local programs unless they were considered to be relevant to the whole aggregated market; only in those cases would a station consider deviating from the schedule of their metropolitan affiliate, and even then, it was unlikely that adequate production resources would be made available.

Stations experimented with these generic programs; in the early days of aggregation, WIN broadcast a program, *Monday Night*, featuring extended news items from around the southern New South Wales Approved Market, but it failed to attract viewers. On Sunday 12 January 1996, the company broadcast *Golden Times*, a look at the upturn in farmers' prospects; of interest to viewers in the western New South Wales markets, but of little relevance to audiences in Wollongong and Canberra. The Prime network introduced *Regional News Australia*, a weekly compilation of news stories from its various markets, with as little reference to location or local issues as possible, and WIN produced a regional version of Nine's *Today* show, *WIN Today*. On the whole, however, stations shied away from production of local programs as a result of aggregation. [East archive, notes January 1996]

Evaluation of the extent of this effect is a matter of looking at a current television program and comparing it with a pre-aggregation schedule when stations were able to "cherry-pick" from all networks and show their own locally-produced material whenever they wished. For example, NBN 3 Newcastle had reported to the Oswin Review that its specifically regional content in 1983 included:

News; approximately ten hours per week

Children's programs;

Beating Around the Bush; 20 thirty-minute programs
Romper Room; five 30-minute shows per week
Saturday Fun Day; three hours per week
Early Birds Show; six hours per week during school holidays
Greenhill; ten 30-minute programs
The Breakfast Club; ten hours per week
Looking In; 26 30-minute children's magazine programs
Junior Auction; game show, 30 minutes per week
High School Quiz; 16 30-minute programs
Big Dog and Friends

Music/Variety shows;

Ian Nash in Concert; 60 minutes
Ian Nash and Friends; 60 minutes
Your Song; 60 minutes
One Night Stand; 60 minutes
Golden Era of Big Bands; 60 minutes
Jesus Christ Superstar; 30 minutes
Spike Milligan Live from Civic Theatre
Annual Mattara (Spring festival) concert
Sincerely Yours; 30-minute program per week
Tonight on the Town; ten 90-minute programs
Tonight With; 90 minutes per week

Documentary productions;

Seven one-off documentaries in 1983
Lifestyle; series of ten 30-minute programs

Information and Current Affairs

Access; six 90-minute programs
Talking Point; five 30-minute shows per week
Review; 30 minutes per week
Civic Report; five minutes per week
Debates and forums; five in 1983
Valley's People; 26 30-minute programs
Various outside broadcasts of local sporting and cultural events
Numerous community service programs and announcements, and local promotions
[Oswin 1984, 178-80]

Compared with this abundance of local product, 14 years later, under aggregation, the NBN program schedule of the week commencing Sunday, 23 March 1997, showed only occasional variations from the TCN 9 schedule. They included the broadcasting of a

show jumping program on the Sunday afternoon, and the replacement of the TCN Sunday movie with a shorter movie, to enable the broadcast of the Newcastle Knights v South Queensland Crushers rugby league match. During the week, NBN showed a local *Today* program after TCN's *Today* show, followed by a children's program, *Big Dog*, at 9.30am. TCN's afternoon line-up was altered to accommodate NBN's hour-long integrated news at 6pm, followed by an off-air recorded version of *A Current Affair* at 7pm. TCN's late evening news program, *Nightline*, was replaced by NBN's region-wide news. On Saturday, TCN's *Today on Saturday* was replaced by *World of Leisure* and *It's Country Today*. [Now, *The Sun-Herald*, March 23-29 1997] It must be remembered that NBN, while affiliated with the Nine network, was not a member of a regional network such as Prime or WIN, and therefore had slightly more flexibility to introduce local or regional programs. In the case of stations affiliated with the Ten network, there was even less variation from the network schedule and virtually no additional local programming apart from news in some cases.

Even with such a dramatic shift in programming focus, the stations' public relations strategies continued to send the message that they were in fact a region's "local station".

According to WIN's Rod Hockey:

We run a strong second in all other markets across the four states and this is no doubt due to our continued focus on local involvement in these communities. [*B & T Weekly* 22/3/96, 26]

The very identity of the stations was affected; some, which had proud traditions as thriving incumbents, became part of super-stations or regional networks. BCV 8 in Victoria, for example, a major local station at the height of the regional monopolies, became part of the Ten network at least in name, and bore no sign of its former identity. It was simply "Ten", and carried the same promotional material as Ten affiliates in Melbourne, Townsville, or other parts of Australia. Capital in Canberra, one of the largest non-metropolitan stations before aggregation, had its name changed to Capital Ten, and was later promoted as "Ten Capital". According to Gough: "It's been a subtle, slow phasing out of the name Capital over a period of time." He said such a move

resulted in a huge saving in terms of production of promotional material, which did not have to be re-voiced or identified differently from the network material in any way:

They can just take them 100 per cent, which is what all the rest of the Ten affiliates have been doing, so they've lost identity, gained cost-efficiency.
[Gough 1996, 7]

In comparison, WIN still had to re-edit its promotional clips from Nine, incorporating the name WIN with the nine dots of the metropolitan station. Colson said Southern Cross had chosen to be known as Ten Victoria, to take advantage of Ten's national identity:

We've lost the identity of Southern Cross, but if Ten does a promotion in the *Herald Sun*, we get the benefit for it. The price we pay is a loss of identity, but we get extreme value in promotion. [Colson 1996, 3]

Knowles believed viewers actually liked having their local stations identified with a metropolitan network as it saved confusion, given that they were viewing the channel on unusual frequencies like UHF Channel 38:

People are content with an orderly way of running their television stations. The fact that it's marketed as a network doesn't really change the way people tend to use it. They still see the local advertisements.
[Knowles 1996, 3]

While the establishment and subsequent dismantling of a number of regional news services meant a turbulent time for journalists trying to establish careers in television journalism, at least one station believed aggregation affected its news services for the better. NBN Newcastle looked forward to further refining the windows it presented to its various viewing areas, and, technology permitting, to creating additional windows to make its local news even more relevant. NBN's Jim Sullivan believed his staff were happier after aggregation than before it, with more challenges, the taking on of more staff, and the introduction of additional local services. [Sullivan 1996, 1] In addition, four of the news editors surveyed in May 1996 [Appendix 2] expressed the view that their audience was receiving a better quality of local television news, compared with the service available before aggregation. All cited choice of local news services, more local news and sport stories, higher standards due to competition, and access to wider coverage through a regional network as the areas they considered to be better. Of the

others who responded to the question, one thought the standard was “about the same”, and two said it was lower because of competition and fewer resources. One answered simply, “no idea.” A senior journalist at a bureau on the north coast of New South Wales expanded his response:

I believe aggregation has been responsible for vastly more professional news services on the far north coast. Ratings show people do want local news, but they don't want the light, loose dribble [sic] often offered to them in the past. [Survey, May 1996]

Such optimism appeared to be the minority view, and, while certainly true in some specific viewing areas where companies demonstrated a strong commitment to local news, was not borne out by developments across the industry generally. In one viewing area within NBN's market, the central coast of New South Wales, a case was put to the ABA for access to the sixth television channel and establishment of a separate community service. The submission from Central Coast Community Television Incorporated said:

Although the central coast receives transmission from Sydney. . . and Newcastle. . . the television audience of the central coast - the fastest growing region in Australia - has been, at least temporarily, locked out of a localised service. For central coast television viewers it is easier to be informed as to the news from Moscow, Los Angeles and Asia (or Sydney and Newcastle, for that matter) than what has occurred at local centres such as Gosford, Wyong, Woy Woy or Terrigal. [ABA Internet site]

Not only were bulletins reduced in size or made more generic, the local newsroom and the station itself lost the position they once held in their community; the voice of otherwise isolated districts, championing local causes. Now, what local news services were offered were brief interludes sandwiched between network programs. The strong link between a non-metropolitan station and its audience was severed. Rayner predicted that aggregation would change forever the relationship between a station and the community it served:

Under equalization, there will be some stations responsible for a whole State, despite wide demographic and attitudinal differences within these new markets. As a regional broadcaster with some 30 years service to communities beyond State capitals, I have to say that the price of

equalization in regional Australia may have to be met at the cost of local services. [ABT 1987, 52]

According to the *Weekend Australian*, country Australians had paid for the dramatic expansion of television choices during the past decade. At their peak in the late 1960s and 1970s, the regional television stations wielded significant power in their monopoly markets as the cornerstone of local politics:

Some observers argue that they still play an important role in local issues, but the aggregation of licence areas in the eastern States has seen local programming pared back to news services and perhaps the occasional football final. [*Weekend Australian* 14-15/9/96, 7]

Bell put it this way:

You won't have your kids go to the local TV station as a birthday treat because they don't do that any more. You won't have 100 jobs in a reasonably small country town pumping that money into the economy, and for the television industry, what you won't have is people being trained. [Bell 1996, 4]

Lack of training bore directly on the standard of the network journalists of the future. Regional television had long been a fertile training ground for reporters, camera operators and other news staff, but diminishing opportunities posed by the financial constraints of aggregation meant that either the jobs disappeared, or that career opportunities were limited and those lucky enough to secure position did not stay long.

Andren agreed there was a general drop in standards since aggregation changed local news, but he was optimistic about the public's demand for the continuation of localism in news bulletins:

Definitely in terms of quantity there's been a dramatic fall-off. But the public, they'll hang out for it [local content] anyway. People want local stuff. I think that's an instinct that's basically there, particularly in country people. I can't see that instinct changing for quite a few years, and if you don't tap it, you do so at your own risk. [Andren 1996, 3]

Begg was less positive, believing that viewers would tolerate an increasing erosion of local content in their news, because they were powerless to do anything; a complaint to the station would be met with polite indifference:

If we don't like what we see on Channel 9 or WIN, we ring up and someone says, "yes, thank you very much." We're not going to change anything. You're not going to get people marching through the streets to demand more local content. [Begg 1996, 6]

Before the policy was implemented, O'Regan expressed concern that by the mid-1980s the term "local programming" was taken to mean Australia-wide programming "rather than its previous meaning of 'regionally based output for regional audiences'." This was due both to the development of the satellite proposal and the changes to ownership laws:

Given that regionally based programming [produced for just a section of the continent] is under further threat by the imminent imposition of equalisation, it's possible that "local content" as it once was will disappear outside of the most populous centres. [1987, 10]

In light of developments since the policy's implementation, O'Regan's prediction was accurate enough. According to Dwyer, regional Australia did not receive the promised benefits of equalisation:

It is plain now that the policy has, in practice, had the reverse effect. Rationalisation of the commercial TV networks led to increased centralisation and a reduction in locally originated programming. Regional audiences are, arguably, the losers. [1990, 1]

Davies considered that the policy undermined a fundamental tenet of Australian broadcasting policy; that television stations should cater for the needs of their local audiences:

The concept of localism has become increasingly irrelevant throughout the 1980s as regional stations became part of the major city networks. In tacit recognition of this, the requirement has now been dropped from the *Broadcasting Services Act 1992*. [1995, 8]

Ironically, even though it could be argued that localism was significantly eroded through aggregation, it was still seen by some as the main point separating competing stations in a market. According to *B & T Weekly*, in many ways the local content was the "all-important factor" in the regional ratings war. [19/4/96, 33]

Resources

It can be seen that local news was an expensive process and while many stations hoped to use news to attract viewers in their new markets, they were frequently unsuccessful. After aggregation, news services, even in incumbent markets, could only be maintained if costs could be kept to a minimum. This had a number of effects on the practice of journalism in regional areas. To put these into context, it is necessary to consider the broader economic implications of the aggregation policy for regional licensees. Aggregation meant that stations had to treble their services, with long distances requiring additional transmitters and translators, and the installation of private link systems or hefty link fees. According to a 1996 Bureau of Transport and Communications Economics [BTCE] report:

Regional television has higher transmission costs per viewer than metropolitan television. Not only does the licence area usually have a lower population, but it requires more relay stations, transmission towers, sales representatives and studios to cover a wider area. This results in higher infrastructure and operating costs. [46]

In conjunction with higher costs, the regional licensees' advertising revenue base was divided as a result of aggregation, with two new competitors vying for the same market which had once been the incumbent's monopoly. There were sales tax exemptions and licence fee rebates from the government, but there was also the need to pay substantial affiliation fees to the metropolitan networks.

The size of the total audience attracted by commercial television is unlikely to be greatly affected by aggregation. . . . Although this [aggregation] produces an approximate trebling of television advertising spots, the total audience-minutes delivered by those spots may not change at all. [BTCE 1990, 7]

Rayner of CTC echoed the view of many of his regional television colleagues when he queried the economic logic of the policy:

Let us not overlook the fact that communities of 200 people or more have been promised three competitive commercial television services under equalization. Will a local retailer spend more to reach less? That is just one of the many challenges for the regional telecaster. [ABT 1987, 52]

To remain competitive in the new environment, operators had to drop their advertising rates, which in turn reduced their revenue. As *B & T Weekly* pointed out, advertising on [regional] television was notoriously cheap. Advertisers often found they could buy television spots for the same price as radio. [19/4/96, 33] In addition, advertisers were able to benefit from tight network schedules which necessitated the timing of regional commercial breaks to the exact length of those of the metropolitan affiliate to ensure a smooth on-air transition between program and commercial break. Often a local advertiser had a commercial shown in more than one viewing area or market, because the station needed the advertisement to fill in additional time prescribed by the network. While businesses in regional areas gained an advantage by the economic conditions, the situation took a heavy toll on the stations. According to the *SMH*:

Aggregation coincided with the onset of the recession, advertising revenue dried up and many of the companies were saddled with massive debts incurred in buying extra licences and equipment to serve their new markets. Most were nursed through the recession by their bankers and are only just beginning to fulfil their earnings potential. [5/9/94, 21]

In the early years of aggregation, the motto of regional operators was simple; do more with less. Many maintained the belief that it simply was not possible for three competing stations to survive in some of the approved markets. That pessimism persisted to some extent:

The outlook for regional television is uncertain, given that a honeymoon period on licence fees provided by the Federal Government is due to expire in 1997, while most affiliation agreements are due for renegotiation before the end of the decade. [*SMH* 16/6/95, 27]

The Department of Communications and the Arts conceded that, based on 1993 data, the complete commercial effects of equalisation had yet to be fully felt. There was “evidence of stabilisation in revenue and expenditure patterns and thus indications that three competing commercial television services can be sustained.” [DOCA 1995 - Internet site]

Eight years after the policy was implemented in the pilot market, the earlier negativity had proved to be unfounded but even so, regional operators did not have an easy road.

The BTCE found that stations in the aggregated markets had lower levels of profitability than the solus stations they replaced, but “they appear to be commercially viable.” [1996, 49] *The Sun Herald* agreed:

Although the capital city stations have done extremely well in the past five years, the bureau’s report shows that regional television stations have been hit hard by aggregation. [14/7/96, 8]

The BTCE concluded that unlike the metropolitan stations, there had been no recovery in the earnings to assets ratio after the recession for regional stations, suggesting that aggregation “has had quite a marked effect.” [BTCE 1996, 75]

After a tough financial battle in the five to six years after the policy’s implementation, by the mid 1990s, positive signs were emerging for the regional television industry. Consolidation of technical resources across approved markets, minimal replacement of staff, and a general settling in to the new competitive environment had contributed to a brighter outlook for regional operators as the *SMH* reported:

After years of heavy losses, regional television has turned a corner and is undergoing rationalisation and mergers and the beginnings of growth. . . After five years of turbulence, sparked by aggregation and exacerbated by the recession, prospects for regional TV are beginning to look up. [5/9/94, 21]

In November 1994, Prime Television posted a “52.4 per cent surge in first-quarter pre-tax profit to \$6.4 million.” [*Australian*, 15/11/94] Regional television reportedly generated \$470 million worth of advertising in 1994-5 compared with \$416 million in 1993-4, with regional networks saying “there is one major indicator backing their upbeat predictions for 1996: a marked increase in sales revenue from the national advertisers.” [*B & T Weekly* 22/3/96, 20-2] The ABA reported an overall increase in commercial television profits in 1994-5, specifically that the fifteen licensees in multi-station regional markets increased revenue by 2.3 per cent to \$442.3 million, “representing eighteen per cent of total industry revenue”. [ABA media release, 27/2/97]

By late 1997, Prime was reporting an increase in earnings of 18.8 per cent, with the company’s Chief Executive, George Brown, saying that signs of a recovery which were

evident in June 1997 had continued after year-end in July, “but it’s too early to say whether the recovery is to be sustained.” [SMH 27/8/97, 22]

Such a turnaround in fortunes did not come about by accident. In 1992, WIN’s General Manager, John Rushton, described aggregation as “an extremely short sighted and stupid policy”, and predicted that one of the services in Approved Market C would collapse within the first five years, because there were not enough people in the market to sustain such competition. However, despite such fears WIN’s revenue had increased overall:

A competitive environment has made us a much better selling organisation. Competition has made us more efficient. We are not as profitable, but we’re not getting into a loss situation. [Rushton 1992, 2]

Aggregated stations scraped their way through those first difficult years by substantial internal cost-cutting. Economic efficiency had become the order of the day. It had always been an important factor in regional television; now it was crucial for each station’s very survival. And nowhere was it felt more keenly than in the newsroom.

The number of additional news services which were established in aggregated areas, only to be withdrawn after a short time of experimentation, has already been documented. This was the economic reality in which journalists and other news staff became caught; aggregation initially promised an expansion, even a trebling, of news services in country areas, but it soon became apparent that what could be established one day could easily be withdrawn the next if the ratings did not show results. In some cases, newcomers maintained their news services while the incumbents bowed to financial pressure and took their news bulletins off air.

The axing of services was perhaps the most dramatic outcome of the economic impact of aggregation on the practice of journalism, with job losses for many and an uncertain future for those whose positions remained. The news services which survived had to undergo major change to ensure they stayed within an ever-decreasing budget. Regional television news had developed as a solid, reliable source of information for its viewers, but it had never been known for its sophistication. Stories often ran to several minutes in

duration, production techniques were limited by whatever facilities were available, and a lack of competition bred a certain apathy about breaking news or rushing items to air. Aggregation and the onset of competition promised to change that, with new equipment purchased to keep up with the competitors, consultants brought in to advise about on-air presentation, and a new emphasis on getting a story first. However, after the initial competitive rush, the economic reality took over. It became too expensive to send crews away to cover stories "out of town". Story lengths began to expand again, to fill bulletins running on depleted staff. More file pictures were used to supplement stories when camera operators were not available to shoot new material. [East archive, notes 1992] Within a few years, local news services in many aggregated areas began to turn full circle in terms of quality. News directors had a double frustration; the need to stay competitive in those markets which maintained more than one service, balanced with the pressing need to keep to budget. Bell noted that under aggregation:

There are fewer voices, in that you've got fewer resources, therefore you only do the stories that are easiest to do which tend to be the diary stories. You might have five microphones at the one event, but it's still the one event, whereas before you might have had three microphones in the city but they were at three disparate events. [Bell 1996, 9]

Coverage tended to be centred on cities or towns in the viewing area which had the best chance of yielding ratings; outer areas were largely ignored. Andren recalled the requirement at Prime Orange to develop "a more creative approach" to stories, to enable the same amount of news to be produced each night at a reduced cost. Smaller communities were neglected at the expense of the major towns in the central west viewing area. "They said basically concentrate on the four big ones and we'll be happy," he said. [Andren 1996, 3] During Begg's time at Capital, the pressures of aggregation were coupled with a series of ownership changes and the inevitable re-thinking of expenditure on each occasion:

With each ownership change the pressure on the budget increased. . and so as the budget declined and the commitment to quality declined, the product suffered. [Begg 1996, 2]

Such changes were not confined to news bulletins; even though network scheduling virtually ruled out any local production other than commercials, any programs which

could have fitted into the format were subject to rigorous budget constraints. As well, stations were no longer able to support community activities to the level they did as monopolies:

I think that aggregation at Capital meant the end of a great deal of very good community support initiatives, because you just didn't have the money to do it. You could no longer commit a half-hour program to the local festival because you were on line with the network. So local communities did miss out; their local television stations were no longer as committed as they'd probably like to have been. [Begg 1996, 5]

The need to cut costs on a daily basis was combined with a general effect on staffing levels in regional newsrooms. News services in more remote areas had always operated with a minimum staff, but now newsrooms in the more populated regions such as Canberra and Wollongong began to adopt similar numbers. When Prime established a service in Wollongong, it hired five journalists including the news director, while its competitor, WIN, employed up to nine for a bulletin of similar length. The pressure was then on WIN to justify having so many journalists, and while numbers were not immediately reduced to match Prime, they did decrease over time.

News services with multiple windows to different viewing areas tended to get by with one co-ordinating news director or producer who looked after all windows, and relatively junior staff stationed in each bureau. In some cases, staff who had previously enjoyed considerable decision-making responsibility, had their authority taken away through economic constraints; for example, the news director at one station in a large regional centre had strict overtime limitations imposed, and was required to contact the station's Canberra office to have even an hour's overtime approved. Often the need for the overtime was questioned, and the request denied. Senior journalists had multiple bulletins to manage and little time for administration or attention to staffing issues such as training. Quality control was affected, with less or no time for scripts to be checked and edited. Often the first time a news director or chief of staff saw a story was when it arrived from the bureau with no time for alterations, or worse, when it went to air. Bell recalled that before aggregation, "my experience was that every script went through the hands of the news director." In the case of WIN's western news after aggregation, "most

of the time you were getting the finished product. Sure, you could whinge about it, but you were lumbered with it.” [Bell 1996, 7]

The combined effect of such cost-cutting was plummeting morale, which led to a high turnover of staff, particularly experienced journalists. The threat of services closing, the pressure to perform within budget, the tendency to replace senior staff with juniors, and the decline in overall quality, meant that for journalists with several years experience under their belt, there was little future in regional television. Bell summarised bluntly the plight of journalists:

I would have been happy to stay, but there was no career structure. And it's as if everyone accepts that no-one's going to stay, so “why bother?”
[Bell 1996, 7]

News production values also felt the effects of post-aggregation budgets. Where WIN Wollongong used to employ four camera operators and two full-time tape editors, camera operators began to take on editing duties and the full-time editor positions were reduced to one. When the company staffed its western news operations, editors were not even considered, apart from one operator based in Wollongong. Further cutbacks meant the abolition of the Wollongong position which meant, for example, that stories from Dubbo which were previously linked to Wollongong for editing, were now transferred to Orange and completed by staff already rushing to edit their own stories for an early pre-recording deadline. Bell recalled:

I know that there were certain stories which were massacred, simply because the person doing it was a cameraman who happened to be able to edit, even though there were instructions for that story. [Bell 1996, 8]

Andren recalled that at Prime, he had to rely more heavily on stringer cameramen to reduce the number of long-distance trips of his own staff: “And I think that will be the way of the regional stations in days to come - either that or the multi-skilled camera-journalists.” [Andren 1996, 3] The effect of that was that important stories were not covered by journalists, but by part-time camera operators with little knowledge of the news process (for example, one stringer at Parkes was the local school bus driver who earned extra money by shooting news). Interviews were reduced to a few questions

hastily passed on from the journalist to the stringer by phone, and reporters had to write the story without actually being on the scene. In fact, the trend more and more was to send camera operators out alone on stories to compensate for a lack of journalists or a lack of experience among available journalistic staff. Camera operators were expected to conduct interviews by placing a microphone on the interviewee and encouraging them to talk to an invisible person, while the questions were asked from behind the camera. This practice was used on weekends and out of regular hours in the early days of aggregation, but later become common at any time, including hours in which journalists were rostered.

The need to get the utmost out of existing facilities had further implications for local news operations. For example, when WIN Wollongong first introduced a news bulletin to its western New South Wales viewing area at the same time as its nightly Illawarra news, the two half-hour bulletins were broadcast live simultaneously from two fully-equipped studios. Later, facilities were consolidated so that the company's three local news programs had to be broadcast from one studio. Two had to be pre-recorded, leading to earlier editing and feeding times, increased pressure on staff - some presenters took part in three consecutive half-hour bulletins with only a short break - and very little margin for error. [East archive, notes February 1994] According to Bennett, the pressure on resources in all news organisations tended to hinder any ability to improve news bulletins or make them more innovative.

The news industry has created a serious dilemma for itself. Changing news formulas in order to produce more distinctive, competitive news would end up costing more, thereby reducing efficiency and in turn reducing profits. Increasing the audience share is pointless if profits decrease in the process. [1988, 112]

Such a universal phenomenon was amplified in aggregated services, where normal competitive pressures merged with the need to stretch and expand resources over large geographical areas. The consolidation of facilities was not confined to news; a number of stations also centralised their scheduling and sales facilities to save money. George Brown of Prime said the company's increasing profits were achieved through the

introduction of new technology designed to “increase automation and centralise many of Prime’s on-air presentation facilities”, and a firmer advertising market. He said the company’s presence in aggregated markets in New South Wales and Victoria saw it well placed to achieve significant savings through technological innovation:

It is also pleasing to report that during a period within which we have placed such a strong emphasis on rationalising the cost structure, the television advertising market has firmed considerably. [*Australian*, 15/11/94]

The changes meant that Prime’s sales and scheduling activities were centred in Sydney, with traffic departments in its headquarters in each market - Canberra, Tamworth and Ballarat - on line to Sydney. With Seven Affiliate Sales located in the same building, all main sales activities could be entered at one time; if the company sold a sponsorship of a program such as *Home and Away*, the sale could be entered across Prime’s entire regional network in one go. Gough said Prime’s biggest change was not one the viewers noticed:

What they’ve done is driven very hard down the line of looking towards a better automated package and lower staff numbers. . . That appears to be very efficient - it appears not to cause any grief and has allowed them to reduce numbers and operate more effectively. [Gough 1996, 7]

In addition, the company developed the ability to broadcast separate local commercials from Canberra to the various viewing areas in the southern New South Wales market, and from Tamworth to northern New South Wales. This removed the necessity to have commercial-broadcasting technology in Wollongong or any of the other bases throughout the network. WIN used a similar method from the beginning of aggregation, with staff in the Wollongong control room generating commercials to the four southern New South Wales viewing areas. At the time, WIN agonised over whether to move its headquarters to Canberra, but decided to stay at its coastal base because it already had valuable infrastructure in place, and considered that Wollongong was positioned in good proximity to Sydney for network and client liaison. [Gough 1996, 9]

Gough said while WIN still used relatively labour-intensive methods in its sales area - for example, a sales person in Canberra would ring and talk to the traffic department in

Wollongong, and the operator would look at their computer screen and give a response - the company recognised that such a system was cumbersome, and might not be as fast or flexible as a centralised system:

Interestingly, aggregation has forced other companies, dependent on their financial circumstances, to look harder at means of saving dollars. . . there's no question in my mind that aggregation has forced some cutbacks, some enterprise.

We can see that some stations have recognised that they may have done things incorrectly and have changed to do it more efficiently. Efficiency is probably what's driving it all. I guess if we had a chance to do it again we certainly would think about a few things, but the basics of it are probably correct. . . At the time we didn't know whether they were or not, but we now know it doesn't really matter much where you are, so long as it's most cost-effective. [Gough 1996, 9]

The fact that some stations did not adequately prepare for the economic realities of aggregation, resulting in major operational changes, came at a great cost to staff. Far from providing more opportunities for program directors and producers, and on-air operators, aggregation had the effect of creating short-term positions which were ultimately axed or transferred elsewhere in the network. Those staff who retained positions faced a much greater workload, as they assumed responsibility for multiple viewing areas where once there had been one. For example, presentation controllers, those staff who physically switched between programs and commercials while a station was on air, had to master the art of co-ordinating numerous viewing areas, all with separate commercials:

Now we don't automatically replace staff who leave. We need to look at the way we do things, we have to streamline. It makes good business sense. Southern Cross had to put off twenty to thirty staff. It should have been gradually gearing up for it. [Colson 1996, 3]

Despite the gloomy picture painted by those who held key positions in regional news at the time the aggregation policy was implemented, a number of news editors in the 1996 survey [Appendix 2] said they now employed more news staff than they did in the monopoly era. However, several of these were in markets which had no news before aggregation, so any expansion was an increase in numbers. Others counted the staff in

their entire approved market rather than the specific viewing area. While returning a generally positive survey, one senior journalist commented:

Looking beyond news the effect of aggregation has meant an overall drop in employment levels in the television industry in the region. Following rationalisation of the incumbent with resources directed elsewhere, there are now about a third of the number of people in this area directly employed in television, compared with 1989. [Survey, May 1996]

Network influences

Another aspect of aggregation which affected the practice of journalism was the change in the way local stations interacted with the metropolitan networks, due to network affiliation. To put this effect into context the nature of regional-metropolitan relationships will first be examined. In the debate over equalisation the term “networking” had been identified as having more than one meaning, referring to arrangements between stations involving:

- a) Co-operation for promotional purposes, to increase audience and revenue by joint advertising of their stations;
- b) Co-operation between members of the network for acquisition of local and overseas programs;
- c) Co-operation between network members for program production or distribution; and
- d) Ad hoc networks to cover special events. [Senate Select Committee 1987, 154]

Hughes and Vines defined a network as an organisational form which was an intermediary between program producers and local channels, and which organised the distribution of programs to more than one channel, either nationally or internationally. [1989, 11] During the satellite debate, the ABT had highlighted some of the advantages of a network system for program distribution and supported its continuation to an extent, but warned that “this must occur within a balanced commercial television system.” [Senate Select Committee 1987, 34]

Through equalisation, different meanings also emerged. Regional networks like Prime, WIN and Southern Cross developed, through acquisition of stations in different markets. These regional networks and other local stations in turn became part of metropolitan

networks, not as intermediaries or as part of co-operative or ad hoc ventures, but as exclusive paying customers, relying on their respective affiliates for the bulk of their program content. Throughout the equalisation debate, various parties had expressed concern about a possible increase in influence by the metropolitan networks. Rayner described the existing relationship between city and country stations thus:

There used to be a reference to “country stations”; some years ago we went up market and vigorously promoted ourselves as “regional stations”. The city stations became the networks and were perceived as the enemy. [ABT 1987, 47]

The Oswin report had warned it was critical that individual stations remained in total control of program acquisition and presentation and the sale of air time. Otherwise a “fundamental part of localism” would be lost. [Oswin 1984, 238] In turn, the Senate Select Committee reported:

The Committee is aware of the risks inherent in the domination of the television broadcasting industry by any business or group. However, in the Committee’s view, networking is not necessarily undesirable. [Senate, Select Committee 1987, 154]

According to the Forward Development Unit, a major change that the introduction of three commercial television services would bring was in the relationships between regional licensees and metropolitan networks (particularly the Sydney and Melbourne stations). [DOC 1985, 41] Four years after the policy was implemented, the BTCE said that this change had essentially reversed the power balance between capital city networks and regional operators:

To the capital city networks, program networking provides a considerable benefit because it allows the relatively large cost of programs to be spread over much larger audiences. . . Furthermore, the lack of other viable programming sources, places the capital city networks in a powerful position to extract the maximum possible benefit from regional operators.

This reversal of the power balance in favour of the networks is seen by some writers as likely to require regulatory protection of regional operators. [BTCE 1993, 33]

Jo Hawke agreed that the equalisation legislation, intended to strengthen regional ownership and counter the strength of the Melbourne-Sydney axis, resulted in exactly the

opposite. Economies of scale made possible by the satellite ensured the previously informal system of networking was “rationalised and formalised”. [1995, 40] Gough saw the benefits of the relationship as going both ways:

The network stations basically call the shots to some extent, but also not entirely, because if they don’t sell to you, where do they sell, because if the other company’s got an agreement in place they can’t opt out of that to change over. [Gough 1996, 10]

Knowles acknowledged that under equalisation arrangements there might be a problem in terms of lack of alternatives for program supply:

If you’re affiliated with a particular network you don’t have anywhere to go. It’s not feasible to go out and buy your own product. I know that some of the regional operators aren’t particularly happy with the affiliation fees that they have, because they consume a large slice of their profit. I’m sure that the “metros” are actually quite happy with it. I think that there is a problem in that there isn’t any alternative source. It’s a monopoly of supply. [Knowles 1996, 4]

The BTCE saw the fortunes of the regional operators as closely tied to the performance of the network program schedule in attracting audiences. Consequently, the network with the highest audience rating had substantial bargaining power by virtue of its attractiveness to regional operators and could command a premium for its programming. The Bureau pointed out, however, that the lowest rating network was not necessarily put at a disadvantage:

Because the third regional operator has virtually no other viable source of programming, the lowest rating networks would be in a position to extract terms similar to those secured by the second rating network. [1993, 33]

The BTCE identified other disadvantages posed by network affiliation; the fact that programs were fed from the metropolitan source with pre-determined advertising breaks, which had to be filled to identical duration by the regional affiliate, and the fact that regional operators might be unable to take account of local programming preferences:

Overall, however, such disadvantages are considered to be relatively minor when compared to the benefits provided by network affiliation. [1993, 34]

Knowles reinforced the view that the situation was a boon for local advertisers:

One of the problems they [regional operators] have got with the network feed is filling up the windows which the networks provide. There are an awful lot of station “promos” filling in the gaps, but I’ve talked to some of the local suppliers in Canberra and other markets, and they couldn’t afford to advertise before equalisation, only the big shops. [Knowles 1996, 4]

The *Weekend Australian* reported that “there are still 45 television licences in Australia, but commercial broadcasting is almost totally dominated by three networks.” [14-15/9/96, 7] The *SMH* agreed:

Networks have extended their reach from the 70 per cent of viewers in the five major metropolitan television markets to include the other 30 per cent in regional areas. . . Gone from these towns are the hundreds of hours of locally produced programming. Also lost are smaller stations and the career paths they provided for new talent to enter Australia’s film and TV industries. Now most national signals come from Sydney and most of those signals originate in Hollywood. [26-31/12/95]

The increased influence of the metropolitan networks, coupled with potential government policy changes, also led to speculation that the networks would simply overrun their regional affiliates. The *Australian* predicted that regional broadcasters were likely to face “a wave of takeovers if the newly elected Coalition Government lifts - as it is expected to - the rule limiting networks to an audience reach of 75 per cent.” [6/3/96, 33] The ongoing issue of financial arrangements between metropolitan networks and their affiliates was fuel for much media speculation, although the stations themselves would say little about the specific details. In most cases, the affiliation agreements between the networks and their regional counterparts expire around the end of the decade. The *SMH* reported in September 1994: “There have been suggestions from some quarters that the metropolitan networks will use the opportunity to extract a higher fee from the regional operators. . . or at worst, engage the regional networks in a bidding war for programming.” The Executive Director of FACTS, Tony Branigan, was quoted as saying:

Both sides will go into the next round of negotiations with different expectations but there is a common interest in the regionals being profitable as they showcase the metropolitan networks’ product. [5/8/94, 22]

The change in the relationship between local station and capital city counterpart had specific implications for regional newsrooms. Adherence to metropolitan program schedules placed severe limitations on how and when local news was presented and in some cases, the capital city stations dictated local policy. Such was the case in 1996 when Prime, as discussed earlier, announced at the behest of Channel 7 that it was moving its local news in all markets to 5.30 to enable it to show its metropolitan affiliate's news live at 6pm, followed by the network's current affairs program *Today Tonight* live at 6.30. Previously Prime had shunned *Today Tonight* and its predecessor *Real Life*, opting to run the popular drama series *Home and Away* in the seven o'clock timeslot in contrast to WIN, which showed *A Current Affair* at seven, after the national news. The move was ultimately reversed after a solid fight from Prime. Andren recalled from his time at Prime Orange that the decision to show *Today Tonight* on Prime and move the local news - their second-top program - back to 5.30 as disastrous:

...and it took them eight months to make them realise it wasn't going to work. . . They'll be pushed around by the networks when the networks feel that it's in their interests. If they [the networks] come up with a top current affairs show again, they'll say "do it", and I reckon Prime will do it. [Andren 1996, 4]

Andren said that as Federal Member for Calare he was concerned at the metropolitan influence on country viewers:

There's no real local commitment from the operators of the local network anyway. . . they're based at Number 1 North Sydney and they rarely get over the mountains, and they're as much out of touch as the networks are in terms of regional needs. They don't listen, and the frustration and anger among some of the staff is quite palpable because they feel that they never get listened to. [Andren 1996, 4]

Bell believed Prime's moving of the local news to 5.30 for no other reason than to accommodate *Today Tonight* caused the community to realise just how far local television identity had been eroded:

I don't really think even Councillors and people like that who should know these things really realised the extent to which television stations, which ten years ago were making proper programs, were training people,

had just become relay stations. . . I think for those people the penny finally dropped. [Bell 1996, 2]

Michael O'Grady of NRTV said the reversal of the decision was the first time Prime had stood up and said, "Hey, we're going to put our programs where we want them. It's ironic that the whole idea for aggregation came out of a fear of networking." [O'Grady 1996, 4] Capital faced a similar issue when it was forced to move to a 5pm bulletin in Canberra, to reflect Ten's decision to move to 5pm in Sydney. According to Begg:

That was a network decision. . . one I fought within and the staff fought within. When that happened, the news here was the highest rating one-hour news bulletin in the country and we were very proud of that. [Begg 1996, 2]

Ten, struggling against its competitors in Sydney, made what was for them a wise decision to run their news at five o'clock, "but in this market where most of the public servants don't finish work until five, our audience was not at home." [Begg 1996, 2] The decision was reversed six weeks later, but that then posed additional problems for Capital, attempting to show its own live bulletin at 6pm in Canberra and relay Ten's Sydney news to the rest of its aggregated market at 5pm:

So here we were running a six o'clock bulletin in Canberra after the five o'clock venture failed, and there was a five o'clock bulletin running in Orange and Wollongong. Commercial feeds came out of Canberra so it became a logistical nightmare - a programmer's nightmare. . . The idea of aggregation was "nutsville". [Begg 1996, 5]

The difficulty of juggling schedules to accommodate local news also applied to weekends; stations like NBN which presented integrated weekend bulletins were able to replace their affiliate's bulletin with their own local/national version. However, stations wishing to show purely local news as a lead-in to a national bulletin experienced scheduling difficulties. In some cases, weekend local bulletins were abandoned or reduced to newsbreaks, and new players in aggregated areas tended to concentrate on weekday bulletins.

The networks' influence was also felt in the overall "look" of local bulletins; many adopted news openers - the music and titles at the start of the bulletin - in a similar or

identical style to that of their metropolitan affiliate. Graphics, supers and weather information used in the bulletin took on a metropolitan style. This was not necessarily a negative effect, as it gave local stations access to additional technology and in many cases injected improved professionalism into the presentation. However, it also served to reinforce that under aggregation, stations were no longer the property of one local area, with a specific local identity. They had begun to look and sound like their metropolitan counterparts. Promotional segments for news bulletins also took on a metropolitan aspect. WIN, for example, began to run a version of the National Nine News advertisement with a shot of its local newsreader sitting beside the Sydney presenters. [East archive, notes December 1990]

Within the newsroom itself, there was a change in the relationship with the corresponding capital city newsroom. In the past, metropolitan stations had been free to access pictures from any of the regional stations; for example, if there was a major fire at Wagga which warranted national coverage, all Sydney networks would contact the monopoly station and receive the local pictures. It was not usually expected that only one of the capital city networks would have a right to the material; if the local station missed a story, the wrath of the networks was tempered by the knowledge that at least their competitors had missed out too.

The arrangement also worked in reverse; a local station might have a nominal link with one Sydney network because it chose to show that network's national news, but it was not hindered from approaching other networks for material which might be used in local stories. For example, a station which showed Seven's news might learn that Nine had covered a story directly relating to a local person or issue; in most cases Nine would be happy to supply the material for the local bulletin, provided it did not find its way back to Seven. The effectiveness and flexibility of such arrangements depended on the working relationship between individual stations and senior news staff. Sometimes agreements were exploited and pictures were obtained "through the back door", by recording them off a regional station's newsbreak or through other means.

Under aggregation, metropolitan stations had links with only one of the three local stations in a region and could not expect the rival stations to supply any news material. This worked well for networks when their regional affiliate had a strong news presence, but was potentially disastrous when there were minimal news facilities or, worse, no local news presence at all. It injected a new urgency into the relationship between city and country newsroom, because of the potential for a metropolitan station to miss out on pictures which their competitor might obtain through their regional affiliate.

Regional stations had long been regarded as “country cousins” by the networks, and journalists in local areas often had to contend with what were perceived to be patronising attitudes from their city counterparts. Now, with the additional pressure posed by a potentially restricted supply of material, local news staff had the sensation of being commandeered by their affiliate. A local news director could expect howls of protest or abuse from their metropolitan colleague if a rival local station had obtained good pictures of a local story, for example a particularly visual fire, and sent them to their own affiliate. Often this was doubly unfair; for example in the early days of WIN’s western New South Wales bulletin, the station had only one crew in Orange while its rival, Prime, had a full newsroom complement. That did not stop WIN’s affiliate, Nine, from expecting the same service that Prime supplied to its affiliate, Seven. If the WIN crew was out of town shooting elsewhere and a major incident occurred in Orange, the wrath of the city Chief of Staff would be fully felt. At the same time, if Nine wanted an interview with a politician who happened to be visiting a town in the region it was expected that the local crew would abandon their own plans and pursue the story, even though it might be several hours drive away. [East archive, WIN internal memorandum November 1991]

Networks whose affiliates had no local news in a region had to rely on stringers for the supply of pictures in emergency situations. This proved to be a lucrative prospect for some freelance camera operators, who were able to make their pictures available at a

premium rate. In other cases, the networks had to hope for amateur video of major fires and accidents, and fly their own crews to the area as quickly as possible.

There were also changes in the reciprocal arrangement; local stations could no longer expect to receive pictures from rival networks and had to be content with the material supplied by their own affiliate. This placed them at a disadvantage if their network station was less co-operative than their competitor's about making special arrangements to shoot local material, for example asking questions about a specific local issue at a parliamentary news conference, or going out of their way to cover a presentation to a local sports person. Sometimes, stringers were able to strike a deal to sell their material to more than one metropolitan station, on the proviso the pictures were not fed back to the local affiliate. This led to tension between the metropolitan network and the local affiliate. In other cases, stringer material was fed directly to a capital city station because the link system made it more expedient to do so, on the understanding that the pictures would be fed immediately back to the local station for their own story. An edited version of the pictures was sometimes sent back to the region, with better material appearing in the network's version of the story.

However, there was a positive side to specific affiliation. While relationships at the Chief of Staff level were sometimes strained, the links formed through network affiliation seemed to breed new co-operation between crews on the ground. Where a local story merited national coverage, for example a major court case in a regional area, crews from the local and metropolitan station would often work together to produce a better story than their competitors. For example, the two crews would split up to cover different doorways of the court house to ensure that pictures of the accused were obtained, or the two reporters would collaborate and go after different interviews which were then swapped. Again, the success of such collaboration depended to a large extent on the relationship between the individuals involved, but there was a new element of camaraderie and team spirit.

The closer working relationship between the two affiliates also gave the regional station greater access to resources such as file pictures, special graphics and contact information. Previously, where there were only loose arrangements between stations, there would have been greater reluctance to supply such material. However, affiliation arrangements did give regional stations some access to metropolitan resources. Some stations were given direct computer access, making them privy to information on assignment lists and rundowns which made their task easier. [East archive, WIN internal memorandum May 1991]

While in the US relationships between local stations and large networks had been strained, due in part to the locals' increasing tendency to cover national and even international stories in their own right, this was difficult to envisage in Australia under the aggregated system where local stations were starved of resources and the networks held the balance of power. American local stations had been redefining the traditional boundaries of news coverage:

Local journalism is fast becoming a misnomer. Local journalism is regional journalism is national journalism, with satellite technology and networking enlarging the reach of local stations by minimizing the constraints of time and distance in the pursuit of a story. [Jacobs 1990, 27]

Other American news directors disagreed with this approach, which often pitted the local station in direct competition with their network affiliate, and began moving back towards what they described as "local-local":

Market research has shown that people want local-local. . .it's not just enough to say that you're covering Sacramento. You cover what happened at the First Baptist Church in Sacramento. [1990, 28-9]

However, local US stations were in a position to demand much more from their networks than their Australian counterparts in terms of tailored news material. Jacobs suggested that this might lead to a change in roles:

Many experts think such a change is inevitable. The network would become more of a wire service, feeding the needs and whims of the local stations - kind of an Associated Press of TV. [1990, 46]

In Australia, the trend was very much the reverse, with the networks expecting their local affiliates to supply material on demand, and the locals arguing from a weaker position. Davies put it this way:

Far from leading to greater power for the regional networks, aggregation has had precisely the opposite result. Regional stations are now much more heavily reliant on the city stations for their program feed, and many are on a tenuous financial footing. [1995, 8]

As well as relying on the networks for the bulk of their programming material, the regional stations' fortunes became increasingly tied to those of their metropolitan affiliate, notwithstanding the advantage initially enjoyed by the incumbent in each region. Commercial performances were strongest where incumbent stations became affiliated with the highest-rating network, Nine. Seven Queensland's Managing Director, David Astley, referred to the "habit factor":

It has taken the new competitors in each market a lot longer than anticipated to draw audiences away from what was the local station prior to aggregation. It is more than five years since aggregation, and the home stations are still achieving ratings that are higher than their network shares. [*B & T Weekly*, 22/3/96]

Ten Queensland's David White maintained that "all regional operators throughout the country are now fairly closely reflecting network ratings trends, with a few exceptions." [*B & T Weekly*, 22/3/96] Stations affiliated with the lowest-rating network, Ten, had to come to terms with the fact that they were likely to become the least-favoured station in the region. However, Ten's performance also countered, to some extent, the belief held in many quarters that one operator in each market would not survive the aggregation process. According to Knowles, those stations could take heart from the fact that Ten had survived many years as the "under-dog" and had turned its fortunes around by catering strongly to a niche market:

Now it might not be to everyone's taste, but the fact of the matter is you can be really good at being number three with a niche in the market, and don't try to compete head-on. It was always fairly obvious that if everyone [in regional television] competed head-on there'd be an awful lot of resources spent trying to achieve it. [Knowles 1996, 2]

However, the benefits of affiliation with the Nine network were hard to refute. According to Gough:

I don't think any Nine affiliates have lost their incumbent position. We [WIN] are by far the dominant in Rockhampton, Toowoomba, NBN is by far the dominant in Newcastle, we're still dominant in Wollongong although Prime is closer than would be desirable sometimes. . . Nine network affiliates are holding their own, but you can see that the gap is closing. [Gough 1996, 11]

The issue of incumbency was also dependent on the nature of the individual market; in more conservative rural viewing areas, the audience tended to fall back into old habits and turn to the incumbent station, while in the cities, viewing patterns seesawed:

In those markets where stability and time-honoured traditions seem to prevail, then the incumbent has got a long-standing advantage. In a dynamic, sophisticated, faster moving society (for example, Canberra) it doesn't happen. [Gough 1996, 11]

Notwithstanding criticism of the network affiliation structure, there seemed little expectation that the affiliation arrangements forged at the start of aggregation would change in the foreseeable future. Any variation of such arrangements would mean the breaking of contracts and possible payment of penalties. According to Gough, metropolitan stations would have nothing to gain by purchasing a regional operator, as under aggregation, they were able to collect substantial fees yet have none of the operational problems:

It doesn't make sense. They [the metropolitan networks] don't want the hassles of running a regional operation. They just want to keep the money. You just put the money in their hands and go away again. [Gough 1996, 9]

Competition

The idea of competition in regional television was at the very heart of the adoption of the equalisation policy; the government's "third goal" in terms of providing equity among Australian television viewers [DOC 1986, 18]. As discussed previously, competition was a primary factor in the selection of aggregation over multi-channel services as a preferred path to equalisation.

The onset of competition brought substantial financial and operational ramifications for regional licensees, changing forever the comfortable existence of regional monopolies. Some feared it would spell the end for many regional operators while others took on the challenge with vigour. According to a 1996 profile of Paul Ramsay, the owner of Ramcorp which controlled the Prime network:

Alone among the regional TV operators with their cosy monopolies, including its own, Ramcorp embraced the idea of competition wholeheartedly, building new studios and a huge microwave network. It was because Mr Ramsay had spent so much time in the US, where he saw vigorous competition, that he realised the regional monopolies were “illogical”. [*Sun-Herald*, 25/2/96, 37]

As with other aspects of equalisation, the competition issue had a specific impact on practising regional television journalists. While the economic effects were felt keenly through the changes to resource allocations outlined earlier, the actual concept of new competitors on traditional home territory had perhaps the greatest effect within newsrooms. Much of this stemmed from the culture of news itself; the expectation of being first with a story, the professional and personal shame of being “beaten” on a story by an opposing news outlet, the measurement of journalistic success not in terms of the individual excellence of a story or its reception by the viewing public, but by its “exclusivity”.

Such pressures had always been in existence in regional television news, albeit on a smaller scale in comparison to the metropolitan environment. Local radio stations and newspapers were considered to be “the opposition”, and in cases like Wollongong or Newcastle where a regional station’s viewing area overlapped a metropolitan audience, there was considerable jostling to be the first to cover major local issues. Under aggregation competitive pressure on journalists was taken to new heights, both by the stations’ management in seeking to secure high ratings for their news programs, and by the expectations and professional pride of the journalists themselves. [East archive, notes March 1989] Opinion on the merits or otherwise of competition among news outlets fell into two camps; those who saw competition as a healthy process which resulted in a

better news service, and those who saw it as a destructive element which took away from accuracy and led to ethical dilemmas.

There is some evidence to support the notion that competition through aggregation raised standards in regional television news. For example, in pre-aggregation days at WIN Wollongong, notwithstanding a competitive attitude towards press and radio outlets, there was a tendency to wait until it was convenient to cover a story. If news broke late in the day, the station would make the minimum effort required to get a basic story to air, with the promise of doing “a more comprehensive story tomorrow.” Being beaten on a story by the local newspaper was considered undesirable and unfortunate, but little more. According to Andrew Bell:

If the paper or radio station broke a story, we didn't worry about it, even if it was a good story, we would break one ourselves. But because there was no-one up against us we were willing to put televisually dull stories to air. . . but they were substantial stories about real issues. [Bell 1996, 6]

That attitude changed completely with the arrival of television competitors. There was a new urgency to get stories to air first, and to be beaten by a rival station resulted in gloom and castigation within the newsroom walls. Ken Begg's experience at Capital was similar and perhaps more acute, given that Capital produced an integrated bulletin where local stories had to blend with national and international product:

The old-timers suddenly realised that what they had done in the past was not good enough. The directors, the producers and the local reporters were suddenly very conscious that it wasn't just good enough to cut corners any more, that if you were going to call yourself a national bulletin or you were going to produce a composite, the standard had to be lifted, and that was good. And it was lifted. [Begg 1996, 2]

Michelle Larmer, formerly of Prime Wagga, recalled immediate changes to the Prime bulletin when WIN established its western news service, and not all of them to do with the stories. There was the introduction of a new studio set, and the encouragement of journalists to include “stand-ups” in line with metropolitan stories. “The changes were for the better; competition is good,” she said. [Larmer 1996, 1]

The Editor of the *Illawarra Mercury*, Peter Cullen, strongly supported competition between news organisations, sometimes wishing his monopoly newspaper had a competing publication to keep his journalists “on their toes”. Competition was the lifeblood not only of industry and commerce but also of newspapers and without it, journalists tended to get clumsy and lazy:

I think if [the *Mercury*] had opposition we’d be a better newspaper. I think we’d probably be a little more professional, I think we’d probably chase a bit harder, I think we’d knock on a few more doors. I think we’d tend to say, “well no, we can’t wait until Wednesday, we’ve got to have it tonight”. [Cullen 1997, 2]

Cullen said after aggregation, there was a sense that more of the *Mercury*’s readers were watching local television news as a result of the competition between the two Wollongong services, WIN and Prime, forcing the print journalists to find additional “angles” to their stories. “The combined effect of the television stations does make us think differently.” [Cullen 1997, 2]

The majority of News Directors and Bureau Chiefs surveyed on aggregation in May 1996 [Appendix 2] concluded that there was a higher standard of news service in their region due to competition between services. Several made specific comments on how competition had changed their regional news services for the better:

Competition has definitely improved the services being provided. I have no doubt that the standard of regional news has improved dramatically since aggregation. A lack of competition meant services could get away with a poor quality service that was often provided with minimum staff and resources. I believe the viewing public would not accept a return to the “old days” . . .

While aggregation has brought a higher standard of news to the region it is questionable as to whether two news programs are warranted in a region with a potential viewing audience of 400,000, given less than half of these watch any local news service. The same story content in the competing bulletins can often run as high as 80 per cent.

However, the by-products of competition, in particular the introduction of more “metropolitan” methods of television reporting in regional stories, were not welcomed by all. Andren felt uneasy at the pressure to cover certain stories like small-scale crime, and

the introduction of city-like features such as very short sound grabs in stories. It made him recall his own experiences as a commercial television journalist in Sydney, when, he said, competition “put a hugely unfair burden on journalists to create news rather than report it.” He admitted that as a regional News Editor in the 1980s he picked and chose stories to avoid what he judged to be in poor taste: “I made a point of not really chasing ambulances.” [Andren 1996, 2]

The coming of a news competitor to the Orange market meant, to an extent, that those practices had to change. The focus also moved away from the journalistic side to the “packaging” of the bulletin; an American consultant was brought in to “tell us how to run a regional news service in Australia.” [Andren 1996, 2] Andren said at the first meeting, the consultant was surprised to learn of the vast size of the central west viewing area, and assumed that stories were fed from outlying areas by “up-link”. “We’d say ‘no, we haven’t only not got up-links, we haven’t got down-links either’,” Andren recalled. The result of the consultant’s visit was a new “infotainment” style, where, according to Andren, the reporters were more important than the report: “And in the country you’ve got to be very conservative about those things because they’re very critical and healthily cynical about their news.” [Andren 1996, 3]

As well as the concentration on all the presentation trappings of the bulletin at the expense of journalistic content, there was a tendency for journalists to focus more on their news opponents than their own story-gathering. The tendency for journalists in competitive situations to jump at their opponents’ shadows had been described as “pack journalism”; a state where everyone was so fearful of missing a story or some aspect of a story, that they ultimately presented identical or almost identical products. Greg Byron, a former American television journalist described pack journalism thus:

When there’s a crowd of them, somebody will get a bright idea or some interview victim might happen by. Everybody has to have a piece of that because after the stories are all written, the news director will watch his reporter’s final product and compare it to the final products appearing on the other stations. If another station has a better story, he’ll interrogate

his own reporter on why that happened. . . Good taste is less important than a good ass-chewing from the boss. [Byron 1997, 3]

Cullen disagreed that such close rivalry was counter-productive, saying the viewer and reader were the ones to benefit. He likened journalistic rivalry to commercial competition:

The consumer gets a cheaper product hopefully because of that, so hopefully one would think that in television, with journalists trying harder you're going to get a better product and a professional product. [Cullen 1997, 1]

McManus also referred to "pack journalism", saying local television newsrooms were particularly influenced by the actions of their news competitors, striving to ensure that not only did they get their share of "exclusives" or "scoops", but that they also covered all the major stories that their opposition covered. "The result is a 'pack' mentality among reporters," McManus said. Research had found that such a competitive mentality led to careful monitoring of rival newscasts and an assessment of quality coverage based not on the standards of journalism - which would require an independent assessment of what the community needed to know - but on an attempt to remove any reason to watch another newscast and to provide some "exclusive" reason for watching one station. Winning or losing this competition was measured by audience ratings, while measures of journalistic quality were secondary. [1994, 70]

Ratings might have been used as a basis for justifying such actions, but there was no clear evidence to suggest regional viewers were influenced by a station's ability to out-do their opposition. Such contests between news outlets appeared to be of little importance to anyone but the outlets themselves. McManus said that in addition, as news bulletins become more similar through the "pack journalism" effect, those viewers who might have attempted to distinguish high from low quality lost any basis for being able to do so. The audience is left with a choice between two similar products, and "consumers can't make the market work to their advantage by patronizing the better product." [1994, 70]

Such a scenario was not apparent in all aggregated markets. Some, such as regional Victoria, still had only one option for local news, and not necessarily from the incumbent station. In other viewing areas such as Newcastle and the north coast of New South Wales, viewers had a choice between an hour-long integrated service and a half-hour local bulletin, although the difference related purely to the structure of the bulletins and not necessarily to the local content of each. In viewing areas such as Wollongong, the comparison was more clear-cut, with each competing service presenting a half-hour local bulletin at six o'clock.

According to Bennett, the pack mentality was further reinforced by the tendency of journalists to socialise together more than most workers and develop a sense of solidarity. This led to the production of "formula stories", with no-one willing or daring enough to move outside accepted reporting standards. As a result, stories from competing news organisations looked and sounded the same:

Together they eat, sleep, travel, drink and wait, and wait, and wait. . . They learn to cope with shared pressures from news organizations and news sources. They come to accept news formulas as inevitable, even though they may express cynical complaints about them in between mad scrambles to meet deadlines. [1988, 115]

Those working in the newsroom at WIN Wollongong during the changeover to aggregation frequently experienced the "pack mentality". Bell recalled:

We were looking over our shoulder. After aggregation, and the dust settled which took probably about a year, we were becoming more and more concerned about what the other guy had, not what we had. [Bell 1996, 6]

Initially, the new "opposition", Prime, was regarded with some scorn, attempting as it was to duplicate WIN's well-established bulletin with few of the contacts or local experience of the WIN journalists. The ever-present pressure on resources meant that few stations had the luxury of employing experienced reporters for their new ventures. Often the best they could hope for was to lure staff from the incumbent to their fledgling service.

Prime had an especially difficult task given the nature of regional television news, which was based largely on journalists building up a rapport with local identities and news sources to generate stories, rather than simply covering organised events. In regional areas, there simply was not enough regular news, such as media conferences, political occasions, court cases, to fill half an hour of purely local news every night. Prime's journalists not only had to deal with their own relative inexperience in television generally and the Illawarra region in particular, but also the prejudice of many of the region's news sources who had built up a strong loyalty to individual WIN reporters over the years. [East archive, notes March 1989]

Bell observed newsroom incumbency led to a certain arrogance among staff. That was particularly so where a new competitor was attempting to stage a local news operation over a distance, and the news headquarters was not in the city or town which had traditionally been the heart of the viewing area. Arrangements over the sharing of footage or the joint shooting of sporting fixtures or other events, used to great effect by the metropolitan networks, were difficult to arrange when senior journalists could not meet face to face:

It puts the incumbent in a position of even increased superiority, thinking "they're talking to me STD". When you're an incumbent you get pretty arrogant. Looking back, we [WIN] were pretty arrogant. We had a right to, in that we had so much more experience and variation, though looking at the team Prime had then, it was quite varied but was all new to the media. They didn't invest a little bit more money just to give them an edge. [Bell 1996, 7]

In the early months of aggregation in 1989, Prime's lack of local contacts was evident. WIN secured numerous major stories ahead of its competitor, for example an admission by the regional police commander that response times to crimes would increase because of cuts to police numbers, a report on the axing of the region's ambulance rescue helicopter service, and an interview in May with the parents of a missing woman, who was believed to have been murdered. Prime's coverage of major events was also hampered by lack of local knowledge. After a man was found guilty and sentenced on 20 July 1989 for the murder of an elderly woman in the centre of Wollongong, WIN

secured a very frank interview with the head of the police investigation team in which he congratulated the judge on the sentence imposed. The Prime crew could only watch and wonder who was being interviewed.

The aftermath of the April 1988 Coledale mudslide in which a woman and child were killed, meant that Prime had to cover the story of the quest for compensation by the woman's husband, Terry Hagan, without the strong links which WIN had established with the Hagan family. WIN was given first access to information on important developments, and exclusive interviews with family members. The Hagan story also highlighted another problem faced by a new service taking on an incumbent; the lack of file footage of major events in a region's history. Prime had no pictures of the scene on the day of the mudslide or the ensuing clean-up operation, and was supplied with some footage by its metropolitan affiliate, Channel 7. The most graphic material, shot immediately after the mudslide when emergency crews were still searching for the two bodies, had been shot by WIN and supplied to Seven in pre-aggregation times, when regional stations would often supply footage of major stories to all Sydney networks. The fact that WIN's pictures, which had been nationally recognised at the Thorn Awards for Television News, appeared in the opposition's bulletin, caused much bad feeling between the two services. [East archive, WIN news rundowns, 1989]

Prime's reporters were tenacious under such difficult circumstances, and began establishing their own contacts. Within a year, the new service was regularly breaking stories and beating WIN on its own home territory. For example, in 1989 when a woman was terrorised by a stalker, WIN was unable to obtain any information from police and simply ran a "read" on the story. Prime, on the other hand contacted the victim and convinced her to do an interview in silhouette so she would not be identified, and take part in a re-enactment. Prime's successes led to a particularly competitive stage in the progress of aggregation in the Illawarra viewing area. WIN retained many of its journalists from before aggregation who were determined to fight hard to retain their local news dominance. At the same time, many wrestled with the transformation of what

had been a very conservative news-gathering process, to an environment where “foot in the door” tactics and disobeying police requests seemed acceptable. This era of competition was more reflective of a metropolitan marketplace where news services were under constant competitive pressure, than what had traditionally been known in regional Australia. According to the US analyst Shook, such pressure often led to bad ethical judgement on the part of journalists:

Many of the ethical problems reporters encounter come from knowing the competition is in head-to-head combat - and pushing hard. Such pressure tends to make reporters overdo, and the problem worsens as management insists on ever-higher ratings and upon reporters whose faces and stories garner instant recognition in the TV news marketplace. In their zeal to be first with the best story, some reporters overstep the boundaries that define ethical behaviour. [1989, 308]

Many examples of such behaviour could be cited from this early period of aggregation in Wollongong. One case was the so-called “Bulli Rapist”, who carried out a series of break-ins and sexual assaults on women and children in the northern suburbs of the Illawarra in 1989 and 1990. Frustration with police failures led to unprecedented outbursts of public feeling, and a high level of fear in the community. The case was particularly difficult from a television journalist’s point of view, with a dearth of information and difficulty in obtaining relevant pictures because of constraints on identifying juveniles and victims of sexual assault. In addition to the zealous competition already generated in newly-aggregated Wollongong, the case attracted national media attention.

The ensuing jostling for the best coverage led to a number of incidents which were quite out of the ordinary for the normally conservative Wollongong media. These included the clear identification of a victim’s house in footage, the invasion of victims’ privacy through seeking, and in some cases getting interviews. When a man was eventually arrested and charged, his family was harassed by journalists at their home and outside the courthouse. The focus of local journalists at the time was very much on their opposition rather than the integrity of their own coverage, and there was considerable pressure within the newsroom on journalists and camera operators covering the case, to secure

comparable or better pictures and interviews. Pressure also came from some unexpected quarters; it was not uncommon for police to comment to WIN news crews that Prime had better pictures of certain crime scenes. The WIN staff then had to remind the officers that they were not permitted to identify sexual assault victims, which included identifying their places of residence. Inevitably, WIN began bending and breaking the rules which it had previously upheld. [East archive, notes May 1990]

While WIN's more conservative attitude to news-gathering sometimes meant it missed out on material, the approach paid dividends on occasion, further souring relations between staff of the two news services. After a bank hold-up in the northern Illawarra suburb of Thirroul in 1990, police learned that the offender returned to his parents' house nearby. Both WIN and Prime knew of this, but were asked by police to stay away from the house while their investigation continued. WIN opted to maintain its long-standing good relations with local police and obeyed the direction, while Prime shot pictures of the house and attempted to speak to the man's parents. The man had fled to the railway station and caught a train to Sutherland in southern Sydney, where he was arrested. Police were so incensed by Prime's behaviour that they tipped WIN off, and a WIN crew was waiting at Corrimal police station when the man was brought back in custody. Prime's story that night was about a "dramatic hold-up and search for an offender", while WIN had the information and pictures about the arrest.

Similarly, Prime's more aggressive approach left them outside the fence when Greenpeace staged a major protest at the Port Kembla steelworks on 21 February 1990, claiming toxic emissions were contaminating a nearby waterway. On the previous day when a smaller protest was held, a Prime crew had gone into the protest area, on BHP property, and had been ejected by security staff. The next morning, when the major protest got underway, WIN asked and secured BHP's permission to enter the site while the Prime crew was forced to shoot from a Greenpeace vessel on the water, with the WIN cameraman clearly in shot. Prime's story that night focused more on the row over

entry to the site with BHP, and the fact that WIN had been allowed to shoot freely, than the actual protest.

On another occasion a Prime cameraman complained to a senior police officer that he had been made to stand well back outside the custody area at Port Kembla courthouse, and had difficulty in getting an adequate shot of a defendant led into court. The officer was so angry at the complaint that he later invited a WIN crew to stand very close to the area to get better shots.

In general, there was a tendency for staff of both services to pay close attention to what their opposition crews were shooting during the day, and to make sure they got the same interviews and pictures. Sometimes this meant that stories were run which would not normally be considered of sufficient news value, simply because it was known the other station also had pictures. For example, if a crew was sent to shoot a car accident scene lacking in news value, a story would still be run if a crew from the opposition station had also shot footage. In the same way, there was a tendency to run stories about suicides, when in the past there was an unwritten rule among all Wollongong media that these would not be covered. A crew would be sent to the discovery of a body, only to be told the death was not considered suspicious. However, if an opposing crew was also at the scene, an excuse would be found to run the story, just in case the opposition also ran it. Efforts were made by each station to monitor the other's two-way radio or mobile telephone calls to try to glean information about stories.

Close attention was also paid to the content of the opposing station's bulletin each night. Prime had engaged a Wollongong stringer to chase night-time police stories. Pressure was placed on WIN crews to secure the same sort of footage, even though they also had to carry out their duties during the day. Once it became clear that Prime was running relatively petty crime stories such as house break-ins, WIN also began to shoot such incidents, even though it would have ignored them previously. Thus, relatively trivial stories appeared on both services. [East archive, notes November 1990]

Prime had a more relaxed attitude towards running stories which had already been run in the *Illawarra Mercury*, and this put pressure on WIN to copy some *Mercury* stories. Prior to aggregation, WIN made it a policy to ignore items which had already appeared in the paper, unless they were of such importance that they simply had to be followed. And while WIN watched Prime's bulletins closely, it rarely acknowledged good stories by running its own version the next night.

Sometimes a major story would run on Prime and WIN's attitude would be that it "hadn't happened." On occasions the story grew to such proportions that WIN was forced to pick it up at a later stage and write it in such a way that it did not sound like an afterthought. Prime, however, had no hesitation in immediately picking up strong stories which WIN had run but it had missed. On one occasion, a WIN cameraman secreted in a caravan had shot dramatic footage of a car spinning out of control and almost into the crowd during regular unlawful drag races on Marine Drive, the Wollongong beachfront. Prime followed up by getting car enthusiasts to perform manoeuvres for the camera, a staged demonstration rather than real-life footage.

In addition, competition gave an entirely new meaning to the annual journalism awards organised by the Australian Journalists' Association. In the years leading up to aggregation, the television category had simply been a contest between a handful of WIN journalists. Given that there was no other television service in the region after the ABC ceased its five-minute local service in the early 1980s, a WIN journalist always won the category. With the arrival of Prime, the award took on great significance, and the successful station in the television category made much of their relative successes.

WIN experienced a rapid turnover of staff in its newsroom, as most regional newsrooms did under the economic constraints of aggregation. As locally-experienced staff moved on and new reporters were recruited, the intensive competitive pressure felt in the early years of aggregation began to wane. The majority of news staff did not know what it had

been like to work in a monopoly and then move into a competitive situation. Nor did they have any of the strong feelings towards their competitor arising from new competition. They were only familiar with news gathering under aggregation. As a result, there was a marked lessening in WIN's concentration on Prime. No longer was it the practice for news staff to gather in the newsroom at six o'clock and watch the Prime bulletin go to air, or even to watch a recording the following morning. Journalists showed only an incidental interest in what their competitor had covered, and there was no action by senior staff to change that indifference. Some practices, like running of footage regardless of news value because the opposition had also shot it, continued, as did the showing of suicide stories. However, the general absorption in the other station's activities tended to decrease as competition became more established and accepted. [East archive, notes 1993]

In 1997, eight years after the introduction of aggregation in Approved Market C, a study was undertaken to establish whether a "pack journalism" mentality continued in the Wollongong viewing area. Anecdotally, it seemed that staff of Prime and WIN no longer devoted as much time to analysing their opponent's bulletins and copying their style. The study sought to investigate whether any easing of competitive pressures was evident in the content of both bulletins. [East, analysis of WIN and Prime bulletins 1997]

Each Prime and WIN bulletin presented in April 1997 was examined, with the aim of making a number of comparisons between the two services and discovering how much news content the stations had in common. Tapes of each bulletin were reviewed on a daily basis, alternating which service was viewed first to avoid a bias in comparisons. Each story was listed along with its running time and any special characteristics. A note was made as to whether the story was a complete pre-recorded tape item presented by a reporter, or a "reader voice-over", or "RVO" (referred to by different stations as "live voice-overs", "LVOs" or simply "voice-overs"). These were stories read by the presenter live from the news desk while recorded pictures were played from a videotape machine. For the purpose of the study, only those items obviously being read live to air were

counted as RVOs. Other stories voiced by the newsreader but detectably pre-recorded, were counted as general videotape items, however brief they might have been. Other items were noted down as “reads”, stories read live to camera by the news presenter but with no tape pictures shown.

Initial observation showed that the bulletins looked very similar. Both featured a young, female newsreader, with a male presenting sport. WIN used a third presenter for the weather segment which was done from a standing position away from the news desk. Prime used their main newsreader for the weather, sitting at the desk. The sets for the two bulletins were a similar shade of blue. However, closer examination of the content of each bulletin revealed marked differences between the two services, both in the type of story they covered and, where they covered the same stories, in the order in which they ran them. There were other general differences. WIN presented far more RVOs than Prime, while Prime featured national or statewide stories and found a local angle for them, for example a comment by a local politician, or “vox pops” of people in the street in Wollongong.

Number of stories (table 1)

During the 22 weekdays in April, Prime showed 310 videotape items, compared with WIN’s 317. This total included 38 RVOs on Prime, and 61 on WIN. Reads totalled 15 for Prime and 22 for WIN. Prime showed an average of 14.09 videotape items per bulletin and WIN, 14.4. WIN ran more RVOs, up to five in a bulletin on occasion. Prime tended to run short, pre-recorded items in preference to RVOs.

Length of stories (table 2 & 3)

Total lengths of videotape coverage per bulletin was calculated for each station. One calculation including RVOs was completed, and a second did not include RVOs. This was because the brevity of the RVOs (some running only fifteen seconds) resulted in an unrealistic average tape time for each service. Over the 22 days, Prime showed a total of 360 minutes and nine seconds of videotape coverage, compared with WIN’s 375 minutes

and nine seconds. The average length of videotape items was found to be one minute and nine seconds for Prime, and one minute and eleven seconds for WIN. The average total videotape time in each bulletin was 16 minutes and 22 seconds for Prime, and 17 minutes and three seconds for WIN. Without RVOs, Prime showed a total of 340 minutes and 21 seconds of videotape coverage, and WIN showed 370 minutes and 46 seconds. The average story length was one minute and 15 seconds for Prime and one minute and 21 seconds for WIN. The average amount of videotape coverage in a bulletin for Prime was 15 minutes and 28 seconds, and 15 minutes and 48 seconds for WIN.

Table 1: Number of videotape stories per bulletin

| Date | Prime | WIN |
|--------------------------------|-------|------|
| 1 April | 14 | 14 |
| 2 April | 13 | 14 |
| 3 April | 17 | 14 |
| 4 April | 15 | 14 |
| 7 April | 14 | 14 |
| 8 April | 14 | 14 |
| 9 April | 14 | 14 |
| 10 April | 15 | 14 |
| 11 April | 12 | 13 |
| 14 April | 13 | 15 |
| 15 April | 15 | 13 |
| 16 April | 14 | 16 |
| 17 April | 14 | 16 |
| 18 April | 15 | 13 |
| 21 April | 14 | 14 |
| 22 April | 13 | 17 |
| 23 April | 13 | 16 |
| 24 April | 12 | 14 |
| 25 April | 15 | 14 |
| 28 April | 15 | 16 |
| 29 April | 15 | 13 |
| 30 April | 14 | 15 |
| Total videotape stories | 310 | 317 |
| Average per bulletin | 14.09 | 14.4 |
| “Reads” | 15 | 22 |
| RVOs | 38 | 61 |

Table 2: Total videotape length per bulletin including RVOs (in seconds)

| Date | Prime | WIN |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1 April | 982 | 1051 |
| 2 April | 1018 | 1022 |
| 3 April | 954 | 1010 |
| 4 April | 999 | 991 |
| 7 April | 1011 | 1010 |
| 8 April | 843 | 1021 |
| 9 April | 1008 | 1036 |
| 10 April | 987 | 996 |
| 11 April | 1003 | 1020 |
| 14 April | 971 | 1039 |
| 15 April | 955 | 1007 |
| 16 April | 993 | 1009 |
| 17 April | 973 | 1048 |
| 18 April | 970 | 1007 |
| 21 April | 1004 | 1026 |
| 22 April | 991 | 1036 |
| 23 April | 1006 | 1062 |
| 24 April | 974 | 1008 |
| 25 April | 1041 | 1099 |
| 28 April | 946 | 990 |
| 29 April | 989 | 1031 |
| 30 April | 991 | 990 |
| Total tape time | 360 minutes 9 seconds | 375 minutes 9 seconds |
| Average tape length | 1 minute 9 seconds | 1 minute 11 seconds |
| Average total tape time in bulletin | 16 minutes 22 seconds | 17 minutes 3 seconds |

Table 3: Total videotape length per bulletin minus RVOs (in seconds)

| Date | Prime | WIN |
|--|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1 April | 959 | 926 |
| 2 April | 983 | 867 |
| 3 April | 883 | 880 |
| 4 April | 969 | 912 |
| 7 April | 911 | 939 |
| 8 April | 771 | 969 |
| 9 April | 896 | 988 |
| 10 April | 853 | 954 |
| 11 April | 958 | 951 |
| 14 April | 971 | 1000 |
| 15 April | 857 | 989 |
| 16 April | 943 | 912 |
| 17 April | 943 | 970 |
| 18 April | 902 | 973 |
| 21 April | 1004 | 999 |
| 22 April | 991 | 866 |
| 23 April | 1006 | 991 |
| 24 April | 933 | 953 |
| 25 April | 974 | 1040 |
| 28 April | 824 | 892 |
| 29 April | 899 | 989 |
| 30 April | 991 | 906 |
| Total tape time | 340 minutes 21 seconds | 370 minutes 46 seconds |
| Average tape length | 1 minute 15 seconds | 1 minute 21 seconds |
| Average total tape time in bulletin | 15 minutes 28 seconds | 15 minutes 48 seconds |

Commercial content (table 4)

Time spent on commercials in each bulletin was also calculated. Prime showed a total of 147 minutes and 45 seconds over the 22 bulletins, and WIN showed 143 minutes and ten seconds. The average time spent on commercials per bulletin was six minutes and 43 seconds for Prime and six minutes and 30 seconds for WIN.

Table 4: Commercial content of Prime and WIN bulletins (minutes and seconds)

| Date | Prime | WIN |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1 April | 6.30 | 6.30 |
| 2 April | 6.50 | 6.30 |
| 3 April | 6.15 | 6.45 |
| 4 April | 6.50 | 6.30 |
| 7 April | 6.30 | 6.25 |
| 8 April | 6.45 | 6.30 |
| 9 April | 6.45 | 6.30 |
| 10 April | 6.50 | 6.30 |
| 11 April | 6.45 | 6.30 |
| 14 April | 6.45 | 6.30 |
| 15 April | 6.45 | 6.30 |
| 16 April | 6.45 | 6.30 |
| 17 April | 6.45 | 6.30 |
| 18 April | 6.45 | 6.30 |
| 21 April | 6.45 | 6.30 |
| 22 April | 6.45 | 6.30 |
| 23 April | 6.45 | 6.30 |
| 24 April | 6.45 | 6.30 |
| 25 April | 6.45 | 6.30 |
| 28 April | 6.45 | 6.30 |
| 29 April | 6.45 | 6.30 |
| 30 April | 6.45 | 6.30 |
| Total | 147 min 45 seconds | 143 min 10 seconds |
| Average per bulletin | 6 minutes 43 seconds | 6 minutes 30 seconds |

Weather coverage (table 5)

Prime devoted a total of 29 minutes and 59 seconds to weather over the month of April 1997, and WIN showed 35 minutes and 24 seconds. The average length of the weather segment was one minute and 22 seconds for Prime, and one minute and 36 seconds for WIN.

Table 5: Weather content (minutes and seconds)

| Date | Prime | WIN |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| 1 April | 1.25 | 1.25 |
| 2 April | 2.15 | 1.48 |
| 3 April | 1.20 | 1.45 |
| 4 April | 1.40 | 1.45 |
| 7 April | 1.15 | 1.38 |
| 8 April | 1.25 | 1.37 |
| 9 April | 1.17 | 1.42 |
| 10 April | 1.15 | 1.33 |
| 11 April | 1.18 | 1.35 |
| 14 April | 1.20 | 1.30 |
| 15 April | 1.27 | 1.36 |
| 16 April | 1.18 | 1.32 |
| 17 April | 1.13 | 1.25 |
| 18 April | 1.15 | 1.42 |
| 21 April | 1.17 | 1.38 |
| 22 April | 1.24 | 1.33 |
| 23 April | 1.19 | 1.20 |
| 24 April | 1.15 | 1.50 |
| 25 April | 1.10 | 1.39 |
| 28 April | 1.16 | 1.34 |
| 29 April | 1.18 | 1.34 |
| 30 April | 1.17 | 1.42 |
| Total weather | 29 min 59 secs | 35 min 24 secs |
| Average weather/ bulletin | 1 minute 22 secs | 1 minute 36 secs |

Similar content (table 6)

Content of each bulletin was examined in detail. A calculation was made of the number of stories in each bulletin presented by only one station, and the stories shared by both stations. It is not possible to draw a conclusion from this about “exclusivity” of stories. It is more than likely than many of these items were followed from the local newspaper, the *Illawarra Mercury*, or from other media sources and were therefore not initiated by the

television news service. However, it does provide some information on the extent to which the rundowns of the two competing bulletins differed.

Stories which were obviously a copy of an item shown earlier in the month by the other station, were shown in the "Only Prime" or "Only WIN" column, but identified as being "follows". Where one station ran a videotape item and the other used a read on the same story, it was counted as appearing on both Prime and WIN, and stories which appeared as one part of a "wrap" were also included. Therefore, the total of stories shown in table six do not necessarily tally with the totals in table one.

The two bulletins differed far more than they resembled each other. On only five occasions was the total of stories shared greater than the number of stories shown by only one of the stations. In the bulletins of 18 April, the stations showed only three stories in common and these were all in the sport segment.

Number of reporters

A calculation of the number of reporters presenting stories in the bulletin did not give an exact reflection of workload, as some bulletins were supplemented by stories compiled in other newsrooms. However, it did provide some information on the resources available to each station. On average, WIN used seven Illawarra reporters in each bulletin, while Prime used six.

Lead stories in common (table 7)

A comparison was made of the lead story in each bulletin and where it appeared, if at all, in the opposing bulletin. This gave an indication of the different approach used by each station in selecting which story should lead the bulletin. On only six occasions was the lead story of the two bulletins the same. On five of the six evenings, the stories were of such significance that they would have been obvious choices to lead the bulletin, for example the death of two young women at the Kiama blowhole on the 10th April, and BHP's decision to close the Newcastle steelworks on the 29th. There was a vast

difference otherwise in the choice of lead story; on ten occasions Prime ran a lead story which was not shown at all by WIN that night, and similarly, on ten occasions WIN's lead story did not appear anywhere on Prime's rundown. On seven evenings both stations ran lead stories which were not in the opposition bulletin. (An incident on the 18th, when Prime ran a "read" in its second break about the saving of jobs at South Bulli colliery, obviously taken directly from WIN's lead story that evening, was not counted in this total.) On other occasions, the priority given to stories was noticeably different.

Table 6: Frequency of stories shared by Prime and WIN

| Date | Only Prime | Only WIN | Both |
|----------|------------------------------------|---------------|------|
| 1 April | 8 | 8 | 6 |
| 2 April | 10 | 11 | 3 |
| 3 April | 11 | 8 | 7 |
| 4 April | 8 | 6 | 9 |
| 7 April | 4 | 3 | 11 |
| 8 April | 9 | 9 | 5 |
| 9 April | 11 | 11 | 3 |
| 10 April | 10 | 9 | 6 |
| 11 April | 9 | 9 | 4 |
| 14 April | 6 | 6 | 9 |
| 15 April | 6 (1 follow) | 6 | 9 |
| 16 April | 11 | 11 | 5 |
| 17 April | 9 | 11 | 5 |
| 18 April | 11 (read in 2 nd break) | 10 | 3 |
| 21 April | 7 | 7 | 7 |
| 22 April | 7 | 10 | 8 |
| 23 April | 8 | 11 (1 follow) | 5 |
| 24 April | 7 | 10 | 5 |
| 25 April | 7 | 4 | 7 |
| 28 April | 6 | 9 | 9 |
| 29 April | 4 | 5 | 11 |
| 30 April | 10 | 10 (2 follow) | 5 |

Table 7: Lead stories

| Date | Prime | WIN |
|----------|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1 April | Head found | New Buddhist temple (4) |
| 2 April | Victims of crime | Kiama school merger |
| 3 April | Head follow (4) | Grain terminal fire (3) |
| 4 April | BHP job loss plans | Police linkup (9) |
| 7 April | Port Kembla lead study (5) | Steel industry committee (5) |
| 8 April | Wilton home invasion | Pivot picket line (5) |
| 9 April | Mine safety report | Paul Matters arrest |
| 10 April | Kiama blowhole deaths (1) | Kiama blowhole deaths (1) |
| 11 April | Kiama blowhole follow (1) | Kiama blowhole follow (1) |
| 14 April | Bargo smash (1) | Bargo smash (1) |
| 15 April | Hotel plans (4) | Hidden camera outcry |
| 16 April | Wollongong flights ceased (5) | BHP delays (3) |
| 17 April | Fast train plans (1) | Fast train plans (1) |
| 18 April | Torso investigation | South Bulli jobs saved |
| 21 April | Ambulance headquarters | SRA rorts |
| 22 April | SRA rorts (2) | Train safety threat |
| 23 April | Drug bust | ICAC inquiry |
| 24 April | Jervis Bay marine park | Rail cancer scare |
| 25 April | ANZAC Day vandalism (1) | ANZAC Day vandalism (1) |
| 28 April | BHP future (5) | Guard dog bashed |
| 29 April | BHP Newcastle decision (1) | BHP Newcastle decision (1) |
| 30 April | Unfair teacher dismissal | Port Kembla hospital downgrade |

Coverage of regions outside Wollongong (table 8)

The concentration of population in the Wollongong/Shellharbour/Kiama areas determined that the vast majority of stories covered originated close to the stations' home base. However, the viewing area also took in the Shoalhaven, the Southern Highlands, and the area from Batemans Bay to the border, classified here as the Far South Coast. Prime showed a total of 22 Shoalhaven stories during the month, compared with WIN's 41. Prime covered 16 Southern Highlands stories and WIN, 13, and Prime showed two stories from the Far South Coast, while WIN showed six.

Table 8: Coverage of regions outside Wollongong
Prime **WIN**

| Date | Sh'haven | H'lands | F.S.Coast | Sh'haven | H'lands | F.S.Coast |
|--------------|-----------------|----------------|------------------|-----------------|----------------|------------------|
| 1 April | | 1 | | 2 | | |
| 2 April | | 1 | | | 1 | 2 |
| 3 April | | 3 | | 1 | 1 | |
| 4 April | | 1 | | 2 | 1 | |
| 7 April | 2 | | | 2 | | |
| 8 April | 1 | 1 | | 1 | 1 | |
| 9 April | 1 | | | 2 | 1 | |
| 10 April | | 2 | | 2 | 1 | 1 |
| 11 April | 3 | | | 3 | | |
| 14 April | | 2 | | 2 | 3 | |
| 15 April | 1 | | 1 | 2 | | |
| 16 April | | | | 2 | | |
| 17 April | 1 | | 1 | 3 | 1 | 1 |
| 18 April | 1 | | | 2 | | |
| 21 April | | | | | | |
| 22 April | 3 | 2 | | 2 | 2 | 1 |
| 23 April | 3 | 2 | | 4 | | |
| 24 April | 2 | | | 4 | | |
| 25 April | 2 | | | 1 | 1 | |
| 28 April | | 1 | | 1 | | |
| 29 April | 1 | | | 2 | | |
| 30 April | 1 | | | 1 | | 1 |
| Total | 22 | 16 | 2 | 41 | 13 | 6 |

Following is a comparison of each day's bulletins:

Tuesday, 1 April 1997

Prime's lead story in this bulletin related to the discovery of a human head, linked to the finding of a headless corpse in the viewing area. The material used was supplied by Channel 7. The bulletin also contained a generic story on sleeping pill abuse, which contained no reference to any specific location and probably was shown throughout the Prime network. In the sport segment, a story on a rugby union match played in Bathurst and featuring Illawarra players was included, shot by Prime Orange. A story on a child sex offender appearing in court contained night-time pictures of the man's arrest. While WIN carried the same story, its version did not have the arrest pictures.

WIN also ran the rugby union story, presented by a reporter from Orange and mentioning Young and Wagga players, and that the next match would be played in Canberra, thus facilitating the same story to be run in all four viewing areas without additional attempts to make it more “local”. A story on motor racing was also compiled in Bathurst, and although it featured a Wollongong driver, it contained a lot of information not relevant to the Illawarra viewing area. An RVO on the Wollongong Youth Orchestra touring the central west was also supplied by the Orange newsroom, and an RVO on Esso oil platforms was supplied by WIN in Tasmania.

Wednesday, 2 April 1997

On this evening, both stations ran a lead story in their news bulletin which was not featured at all in their opposition’s bulletin. The WIN bulletin also featured a story on the woes of the fishing industry run in both the Wollongong and Canberra viewing areas. This was a common practice for stories based on the Batemans Bay area which, while technically in the Wollongong viewing area, was considered interesting to Canberra because of its proximity and large floating population from the national capital. WIN also ran a story on hemp farming which contained no reference to any region and would have been used in multiple viewing areas.

On what was evidently a quiet day for news, Prime presented a number of items which were essentially national stories, with an attempt to make them more “local” by introducing local interviews and other angles. For example, the lead story related to new legislation for victims of crime, and comment was sought from the family of Ebony Simpson, a Bargo girl who was murdered. Other such stories included an increased use of poker machines, teenagers on diets, and awareness of the needs of blind people. The news bulletins had only three stories in common.

Thursday, 3 April 1997

Prime’s bulletin featured a number of extremely short items. A journalist was sent to the Southern Highlands to cover a court story, and also covered a new health centre at

Bowral. This was an example of the practice in regional television of getting value out of “away” trips, by requiring at least one additional story, often taken from the local paper. The bulletin also contained a follow-up to the victims of crime story of the previous day, featuring an interview with Ken Marslew, the father of a murder victim, supplied by Channel 7. There was also a story about a local surfer competing at Bells Beach in Victoria, presumably supplied by Seven, and pictures of the Illawarra Steelers from the Gold Coast.

The stations had differing opinions on the most important story of the day. Prime led with a follow-up to the discovery of the human head, which WIN ran fourth as an RVO. WIN led with a fire at the Port Kembla grain terminal, which Prime ran third. WIN ran a story on a visit by the Mine Resources Minister to Lithgow, but this was obviously a separate story done just for Wollongong, not a generic.

Friday, 4 April 1997

The bulletins again highlighted the different attitude of the two stations in selecting lead stories. WIN led with a police video link-up where the Commissioner, Peter Ryan, addressed local officers. Prime ran the same story at number nine in its rundown. WIN’s bulletin also featured a story on regional trade, containing many generic terms such as “rural and regional”, “country areas”, and “regions”. The towns of Nowra and Goulburn were mentioned in the introduction, but this story would have been used in multiple markets with the introduction rewritten accordingly.

A second story on Wollongong’s travelling youth orchestra was shot in Dubbo but compiled in Wollongong, and footage of the country league championships came from Newcastle, supplied by NBN which, while not a member of the WIN network, was an ally through common affiliation with Channel 9. Prime also ran the country league from Newcastle. The two bulletins had eight stories in common.

Monday, 7 April 1997

These bulletins contained a large number of shared stories, including the entire first break of both, although the order of presentation was quite different. Prime led with a study of Port Kembla lead levels, which WIN ran fifth. WIN led with a story on a steel industry committee, which Prime ran fifth. Prime's bulletin featured a story on diabetes which was generic, with no reference to the local area. Footage of a surfing contest came from Sydney, and a story on two prison escapees, one of them from a Wollongong suburb, was supplied by Prime Canberra.

Tuesday, 8 April 1997

The majority of stories in these bulletins were different to those shown by the opposing station. WIN featured a story on nursing homes which was essentially a national story with a local angle supplied by the Illawarra Retirement Trust. More footage of the country league championships was supplied by Newcastle. Prime ran two national stories with local angles; one on energy savings, the other on dog attacks.

Wednesday, 9 April 1997

These bulletins were also markedly different to one another, with only three stories in common. Prime ran a generic story on body image with no local references, while WIN featured a rugby union story compiled by an Orange journalist which was shot in Sydney and mentioned "Wagga", "South Coast" and "Canberra", thus covering four viewing areas. WIN had exclusive footage of Illawarra union leader Paul Matters arrested at a picket line.

Thursday, 10 April 1997

Both bulletins featured a major news story, the death of two young women at the Kiama blowhole, so it was not surprising that both ran it as their lead story. Even though it was the lead story and occurred in the middle of the day (just before 2pm), it was not included in the headlines of the WIN bulletin. This highlighted the restriction imposed by producing three bulletins - Wollongong, central west and south west - from one studio,

and the need to record the headlines very early in the day. Despite the importance of the story, WIN did not send a journalist to Kiama but relied on the phone and details relayed by the camera operator at the scene. The WIN bulletin also featured a generic story on a Bahai woman touring “country Australia”. Prime did manage to get the blowhole story into its headlines. Interestingly, an RVO on unemployment figures contained the opposite slant to a read on WIN; Prime presented the figures as “bad news” for the region, while WIN highlighted the fact that the figures had fallen. Prime also took a different approach to a shared story on a sewage inquiry in Wollongong, concentrating on a personal angle, the effects of the issue on a local fisherman.

Friday, 11 April 1997

The bulletins again shared a lead story, a follow-up to the deaths at Kiama. The Prime bulletin contained a very short second break (only two stories). An item about a Shoalhaven farm “rip-off” contained footage of a farm at Cowra in the central west, while the weekly racing tips were generic, produced for a wide network audience. A preview of the Wollongong Wolves soccer match against Canberra was produced by the Canberra newsroom and contained no local angle for a Wollongong audience. Similarly, a story on an NRMA repair system was produced for a Canberra audience, hung on the fact that the system was trialed in Wollongong. A story on a local trap shooter was shot at Wagga.

Monday, 14 April 1997

A major news story, a serious accident near Bargo to the west of Wollongong, dictated that both bulletins would feature the same lead story. WIN ran a story on dairy cattle which contained the phrase “farmers from the highlands to the central west”, facilitating its presentation in multiple viewing areas. The fact that the meeting in the story took place in the Shoalhaven was only mentioned in the introduction and on the “super”. A story on surfing was shot at Newcastle. Prime also ran the Newcastle surfing, and another generic health story, on binge eating. The introduction contained reference to “Health reporter, Cathy Reid”, a journalist not based in Wollongong. The different

priorities in story selection were again apparent, with WIN running a story on a slag protest at number two, and Prime at number eight.

Tuesday, 15 April 1997

The bulletins featured a large number of shared stories. Prime ran a story on a child restraint campaign which did not refer to the local area except in the reporter's standup. WIN chose to present a number of stories as "wraps", including armed holdups in the Illawarra suburbs of Berkeley and Windang and two court stories, while Prime featured them as separate items.

Wednesday, 16 April 1997

The bulletins both featured generic stories; Prime ran an item on protection for inventors which was not compiled by a local reporter and had no local reference. WIN ran a story on ostrich farming which mentioned "the state's west", and a cycling story with reference to "Wagga" and "Dubbo". A story on a solar boat, built by a South Coast person, was shot during testing in Canberra. Prime's choice of lead story, a decision to cease commuter flights from Wollongong, was run at number five in WIN's bulletin.

Thursday, 17 April 1997

The bulletins contained few stories in common, although both ran the same lead story about plans lodged for the very fast train project. Both also contained "hard news" stories which the opposition did not carry; WIN had the only story on a bank evacuation due to a gas leak, and Prime covered a Port Kembla sexual assault. WIN's story on a submarine mishap at Jervis Bay featured a Defence spokesman from Canberra, and the story was written for both viewing areas. A story on a fundraising project at Batemans Bay was also geared to both areas.

Prime's version of the submarine mishap contained no actual footage of the incident. The stringer who shot the material sold it to WIN and Channel 7 on the proviso that Seven did not supply it to Prime. Prime was forced to use general file footage of the navy. A

story on sheep disease featured Prime Canberra's pictures of a Goulburn meeting but a generic script. The bulletin included a story on a Moruya (South Coast) golfer playing at Port Stephens north of Newcastle.

Friday, 18 April 1997

The bulletins were markedly different, with Prime leading with progress on the investigation into the headless corpse, and WIN an exclusive about jobs saved at the South Bulli colliery. There were no first break stories in common. Prime picked up the mining jobs story off air, and ran a read on the item at the beginning of its second break. Prime also featured a story on a science week workshop which was shot and compiled in Canberra and had no local link. The weekly racing tips were generic. WIN ran a story on the closure of the Woodlawn mine at Goulburn which was Canberra-based, and of marginal interest to a Wollongong audience.

Monday, 21 April 1997

The Prime bulletin featured another generic health report, on hypnotherapy, and ran a story on the financial fortunes of a former Wollongong Council executive which WIN ran on the previous Friday. WIN had the difficult task of presenting a story on one of its own staff members, charged with sexual assault over an incident at a staff Christmas party. In this bulletin, the story was covered in a read. Neither bulletin featured any stories from the Shoalhaven, Highlands, or Far South Coast.

Tuesday, 22 April 1997

On this occasion Prime followed a story which WIN ran on the previous night, about allegations of SRA corruption. Prime also ran a read about the name of an accident victim being released, while WIN ran the name in their story the previous evening. Prime's second story was about a statewide issue concerning the TAB, with a local angle and reaction.

Wednesday, 23 April 1997

WIN ran a story on new arrangements for ambulance administration in the Illawarra, which Prime ran two nights previously. Prime led with an exclusive story about a drug bust at Sanctuary Point near Nowra, south of Wollongong. Its bulletin also featured a story on the Jervis Bay Marine Park (South Coast) which contained interviews with politicians from Sydney, either provided by Channel 7 or by a crew travelling to Sydney for the day. A story on disabled games was shot in Ballarat in Victoria.

Thursday, 24 April 1997

The different approach to formulating a rundown was again evident, with Prime running a story about an Olympic training facility in the Illawarra at number three, while WIN ran it as the lead story in sport. Prime had a very short second break, but ran an additional news story before the weather, apparently because it was not ready to go to air in its allotted spot. A Prime story on country league contained both Illawarra and Newcastle angles.

Friday, 25 April 1997

Anzac Day dictated that both bulletins would have similar first breaks, with a round-up of activities throughout the region. Both led with an incident in the Shoalhaven where a memorial was vandalised. Prime ran a story about vintage planes which was shot and compiled by Prime Orange, with the only local link a reference in the introduction that local enthusiasts would be participating. WIN ran a lengthy play-off at the end of the bulletin using some of the Anzac Day footage shown in the first break.

Monday, 28 April 1997

The bulletins had nine stories in common. WIN's first two stories - about a guard dog being attacked and alleged use of contaminated oil - were not featured in the Prime bulletin. Prime ran a story on a Stanwell Park rescue, which WIN only ran as a read, and WIN ran items about a crash at Avondale and an arrest at Corrimal, as one wrap.

Tuesday, 29 April 1997

The major story of BHP's announcement about the closure of the Newcastle steelworks and the future of Port Kembla, meant that the bulletins had a common lead. On this evening there were twelve stories in common, an unusually high number, although in some cases what was presented as a full story by one station was used in a read or wrap by the other. The biggest difference was in the presentation of a story about a visiting circus; WIN covered it in terms of an animal liberation protest, while Prime ran it on the following night as the "colour" story at the end of the bulletin.

Wednesday, 30 April 1997

The final bulletins of April 1997 saw both services presenting lead stories which their opposition did not carry; WIN a story about the downgrading of Port Kembla hospital, and Prime an item on an unfair dismissal case. Prime ran a story on an anti-Holsworthy airport protest at Campbelltown north-west of Wollongong in which a protester was injured; the story had no local angle except the implication that some people had travelled from the Illawarra to join the protest. WIN ran a story about local traffic problems which had been run previously by Prime, and it also featured a story about a shopping bag trial which Prime had already run. A story about Olympic shooter Michael Diamond snubbing his home town of Goulburn was compiled by WIN Canberra.

Summary

It can be seen from this comparison that by 1997, competing news services in the aggregated Wollongong viewing area of Approved Market C were not demonstrating signs of "pack journalism". While the presentation styles of the two services were similar, there were significant differences in their content. There was evidence on at least one occasion that Prime staff were monitoring the WIN bulletin as it went live to air and were not afraid to copy significant stories which their own bulletin had missed (for example, the South Bulli story on 18 April). However, both services also ran stories which had been shown by their opposition station several days earlier. In the early days of aggregation, such stories would have been discarded by WIN as the station would not

have been willing to be seen to be openly following its opponent. The two bulletins had evolved into services which were quite different from one another, providing a legitimate choice for viewers rather than simply copying each other through a “pack mentality”. At the same time, a lessening in concentration on the opposition’s activities had tended to negate any improvements to be gained from healthy professional rivalry. The rival stations were no longer preoccupied with getting stories to air before their opposition, concentrating their efforts instead on simply covering the news of the day.

The wheel seemed to have turned full circle, returning to a balance similar the monopoly era before aggregation, when stations did not spend undue time following or mimicking their opposition media. This differed greatly from the developments immediately after aggregation, when competition brought major changes to news operations and stations were very mindful of their rivals’ activities. Clearly, the introduction of competition had a marked effect on the practice of journalism in regional television, but this effect was felt most strongly in the early years of aggregation in each region. That is not to say that it waned completely in the ensuing years; rather it was dependent on the approach of senior journalists in each news service and individual circumstances in each viewing area.

The effect of competition, combined with a general decrease in regional stations’ emphasis on localism, the continued push to cut costs and the demands of metropolitan affiliates, meant that aggregation brought major changes to regional television newsrooms in Australia. The following case study shows how one news service was created through aggregation and in turn affected by the policy’s ramifications.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A LOCAL NEWS SERVICE

BY WIN TELEVISION IN WESTERN NEW SOUTH WALES

The development of WIN's local news service in the central (Orange/Bathurst/Dubbo) and south west (Wagga Wagga) viewing areas of Approved Market C provides examples of some of the bulletin structures introduced to regional areas during aggregation, and evidence of the policy's effect on the practice of journalism. The case study in this chapter describes one licensee's attempt to grapple with the concept of regional television news under aggregation. It is not intended to criticise an individual operator, but aims to demonstrate some of the operational and managerial issues faced by regional licensees as they attempted to provide news services in new markets, under the financial constraints of the policy.

Much of the information in the case study, particularly the establishment of the western news service and its expansion to two half hour local bulletins, comes from the candidate's experience as News Director of the service from its inception until May 1994, and from company documents including internal memoranda, news scripts and bulletin rundowns.

To examine the development of WIN's western news, it is necessary to reconsider how each of the three licensees in Approved Market C initially tackled news in the aggregated environment. Prime, the incumbent in the state's west, continued to produce a separate half-hour bulletin in both the Wagga and Orange areas. In Canberra, the station struggled with a series of format changes, and in Wollongong, Prime initially had a difficult task of establishment against the incumbent, WIN. At the time WIN was considering its options in the west, Prime's Wollongong news was only rating the equivalent of its Canberra stablemate's newsbreaks, at a much higher production cost. When aggregation began, Capital ran a five-minute window of Wollongong news for south coast viewers, but it axed the service after a year. In the west, Capital made no effort to begin a local news service.

Despite a challenge mounted by Prime, WIN continued to dominate the Wollongong news ratings, and performed strongly in Canberra. From 1989 to 1992, its six o'clock timeslot out west was filled by *The Addams Family*, and later by the ill-fated *Sydney Extra*, a half-hour news-magazine program featuring parochial Sydney-based stories, before National Nine News was broadcast at 6.30. That combination achieved modest rating success, due largely to the far-reaching popularity of veteran news presenter Brian Henderson.

Integrated Bulletin

On 6 July, 1992, a significant development occurred in the provision of regional news services in Approved Market C. WIN Television began broadcasting a half-hour news bulletin to the western region of New South Wales, an area previously dismissed in terms of WIN's news services, because it was seen not to be sufficiently lucrative in terms of advertising revenue to justify the cost. WIN considered its options in detail about venturing into the western market with its own local news, basing its judgement on its own experiences through aggregation and those of its rivals. Four alternatives were considered:

1. Duplication of the Wollongong and Canberra news services, by providing a half-hour local bulletin in each section of the western market. That was seen at the time as a very expensive option, and the company could see the difficulties in going head-to-head against the incumbent, Prime. Viewer loyalty out west would be hard to break. The station was very mindful of the difficulties experienced by Prime and Capital in Wollongong in taking on a strong incumbent, and of its own experiences, and those of Prime, in the Capital-dominated Canberra market.

2. Windows of local news: The rationale behind this option was similar to Capital's initial venture into Wollongong. One of WIN's existing news services would be broadcast out west, and five minutes would be dedicated to western news. But the company remained undecided about which of its services, Illawarra or Canberra, would

be broadcast, and doubted that the “windows” idea would appeal to viewers used to seeing extensive local news.

3. A token service: This would involve a five-minute newsbreak at around 6.25 pm, at the end of another program, and leading in to National Nine News. There was the difficulty of deciding where the service would originate from, and continued doubts about viewer appeal.

4. No local news content: This was the option initially adopted by both WIN and Capital in the western market. However, WIN had decided it was time to provide some opposition to Prime’s news. [East archive, WIN internal memorandum November 1991]

At the time those options were considered, the recommendation of senior news staff was number three, a five minute update, with material provided by stringers and supported by one or two permanent news staff in each location. However, after long consideration of cost factors and the real possibility of attracting some more viewers, the company finally rejected all four options, and decided on a half-hour integrated bulletin.

The proposal, put forward by the Network News Director, Terry Moore, was a combination of the hour-long integrated format which had been highly successful for NBN Newcastle and Capital in Canberra, and WIN’s traditional formula of a half-hour local news, but it would have a regional rather than purely local focus. Where Prime divided the western region into two viewing areas, central west and south west, based on the viewing patterns of the former monopoly stations at Orange/Dubbo and Wagga Wagga, for news purposes WIN would merge the western viewing areas into one and combine the local bulletin with national stories from the metropolitan affiliate, TCN 9.

The bulletin would cover the entire western region, up to Coonabarabran in the north, east to Lithgow and Tumut, and west to Narrandera, encompassing Dubbo, Orange, Bathurst and Wagga Wagga. It would include local stories produced by journalists based in the region, but the local material would be mixed with national stories from TCN 9. The program would be marketed as “All you need to know” in half an hour; local,

national and international news, as opposed to Prime's half-hour of purely local news followed by Seven's national news. WIN reasoned that many viewers in the west weren't really interested in Prime's "filler" material, and would prefer to only see the top stories of the day. That would particularly apply in a centre like Orange, which WIN management perceived as fast becoming inhabited by decentralising public servants with the relocation of the New South Wales Department of Agriculture. It was thought that people used to a city news service would prefer to see a metropolitan-style bulletin, with a smattering of the day's top local news.

The project was given approval in February 1992, with a tentative on-air date of June-July 1992, leaving only a short time for final planning. The biggest problem was having no example to follow. While NBN and Capital had been running hour-long integrated services based on their monopoly markets, a half-hour service encompassing such a large area of the state had logistical problems all of its own. The Wollongong-based News Director had to quickly become familiar with the geography of the area, mostly through studying maps and background reading, recruit staff who could quickly grasp the philosophy behind the new service, and learn the complicated workings of the TCN news system. The latter was crucial, as at least half the material in the bulletin would originate from TCN.

A visit by the News Director to NBN Newcastle and a study of that station's hour-long integrated service proved invaluable. There was a glimpse of some of the difficulties which lay ahead, in particular the last-minute rush before airtime, given that TCN stories were often only completed with minutes to spare. Regional television journalists, used to meagre resources and usually only one or two edit suites to service a newsroom, learned quickly to have their stories ready for editing as early as possible. In Sydney, more editing facilities meant journalists had the luxury of adding late information or other material to their stories, and editing them very late in the day. The marriage of regional deadlines and metropolitan time-frames would prove to be a difficult one.

The task of looking for staff and organising the office was tackled. It was decided the company would employ a journalist and camera operator to work out of Orange, and the same in Wagga. Each of those offices already had a production crew and editing facilities. The news teams would have to share the edit suite with the production staff, inconvenient, but a not uncommon arrangement in regional television. Another journalist would work with the News Director in the Wollongong office, helping to co-ordinate the bulletin and writing sport and some overseas stories, and the Wollongong office would have its own edit suite, and a full-time tape editor. [East archive, notes March 1992]

As well as putting together any stories produced in Wollongong, the editor's job would also include recording the daily feeds from TCN. At 1.40pm each day international material was generated out of Sydney to all of TCN's network affiliates from which the Wollongong staff would produce an overseas wrap. One legacy of the combination of local and national news was that the new service would generally provide only a scant coverage of international stories although this would naturally be reviewed if there was a major international event. Because of the tight time frame, it would not be possible to present the same international stories as TCN on a nightly basis, hence the need to re-package the international material to suit the WIN bulletin. This also ensured that at least some of the TCN-generated material was ready relatively early in the day.

The remaining TCN stories were fed out to the network affiliates from 5pm. In theory this would give a reasonable time to record the stories WIN wanted and have them in order for its live bulletin at 6pm. In reality, it made for some hair-raising experiences, not unlike the famous videotape scene in the movie *Broadcast News*, when a story is rushed down the corridor and thrust into the appropriate tape machine with moments to spare. As discovered at NBN and later through direct experience, many of those stories did not actually arrive until just before six o'clock, and others came through while the bulletin was actually on air.

WIN advertised for staff, experiencing the challenge of filling jobs on a new bulletin where much of the ground was as yet unknown. The company was keen to employ journalists in Wagga and Orange with local knowledge of those areas, and was fortunate to find two such reporters. The camera and editor positions were filled from within the company, and a journalist was employed to assist in Wollongong. Several people were auditioned as potential newsreaders, but WIN management settled on Nathan Wood, who had been presenting the weather on the company's Wollongong bulletin. Sport would be read by Wollongong radio personality Dean Matters. [East archive, WIN Western employment applications 1992]

Because of the enormous distances to cover, with only two crews out in the field, it was vital that WIN secured the services of as many stringers as possible. These freelance camera crews, who operated in regions all over Australia, ranged from highly professional units with broadcast-quality equipment, to amateurs with a very basic sense of news. In some areas finding stringers proved a challenge and there was the first sign of a competitive news environment in the viewing area. Prime had got in ahead of WIN, and put a number of established stringers on retainers to shoot exclusively for them. WIN managed to attract the interest of several others, and worked out systems to get their tapes to the nearest bureau; by bus, train, courier, or the goodwill of local truck drivers.

To complicate matters, a number of stringers shot on U-matic format, which had to be got to Wollongong for transfer to Betacam for editing. In Dubbo, a system was devised where the local stringer would shoot a story by a certain time, and give the tape to the guard on the daily XPT service to Orange. This was highly risky and relied on the guard remembering to give the tape to station staff at Orange. On bad days, the company was left with a hole in the bulletin, while the Dubbo story went for a ride around the New South Wales rail system.

The first week of July, 1992 was the start-up date, to coincide with a ratings survey. WIN began to run a promotional campaign, and to put together a plan for its day-to-day operations. It was anticipated the Orange and Wagga crews would each produce two edited stories, which would be sent by link or bearer down to Wollongong in the afternoon. The Orange bureau already had a company-owned link installed, but Wagga was a little more challenging. A permanent booking had to be made with Telecom every day between 4pm and 4.30, and the camera operator would drive up to the Telecom tower at Wagga, and feed his stories down a bearer to WIN Canberra, which would link them on to Wollongong. This process, at an external feed-point, would have to occur regardless of the weather.

The News Director's day followed a standard format. Early in the morning the journalists in the west were contacted and a discussion took place about what would be covered that day. The company believed the strength of its bulletin would lie in only having to cover the top stories of the day, unlike its opposition Prime, which was committed to filling a half hour with purely local news in each of the two viewing areas. The News Director rang the reporters from home at around 8.30, then arrived at work at about 10am. The first job was to check TCN's assignment list, to see what they intended covering that day. WIN had the Basys computer system installed - a specialised system for television news - and that enabled staff to dial into Nine's computer system via a modem.

During the day a rundown was compiled comprising a mixture of local and national stories and featuring the wrap of international stories. The aim was to try to get an even balance of Wagga and Orange-based stories, without missing out on any of the top national stories. It had been observed that a substantial proportion of TCN's rundown was made up of very parochial Sydney news, presumably of marginal interest to people out west. That enabled WIN to fit in seven to eight national stories, plus four of its own, as well as local sport and the international wrap. [East archive, notes June 1992]

Launch day for the new bulletin was announced as 6 July, and two weeks before the event, the company went into full dress rehearsals. The station's opposition greeted WIN's arrival with some skepticism. Peter Andren, then Prime Orange's News Editor, reportedly said he was confident Prime's bulletin could overcome any competition posed by WIN and that he believed news services which competed with each other "ended up distorting the news." WIN Television's Manager, Kerry Kingston, said the bulletin would cover all the major news and issues and would provide "a realistic alternative to Prime's news service." [*Central Western Daily* 22/7/92, 2]

On the first rehearsal day WIN's worst fears were realised; the lead story, a major item relating to the Independent Commission Against Corruption finding on the New South Wales Premier, Nick Greiner, did not arrive in time for it to be run early in the bulletin. The producer had to hurriedly reshuffle the stories while the bulletin was on air, waiting anxiously for TCN to feed the story down. It came in time to run fourth. At the same time the autocue failed, and Nathan Wood had to read the introduction off the script on his desk. The rehearsal had served its purpose, giving a taste of things to come and helping to develop skills to cope with such eventualities. By the end of two weeks the company was feeling confident. The reporters' stories were looking good, and the overall product was slick and professional.

The 6th July dawned, and all the planning had to come together. The news staff hoped for some strong stories and, in journalistic terms, they were not disappointed. There was a hit and run fatality at Temora, in the Wagga area, and the local crew managed to get pictures of police blockading the highway and pulling over and questioning truck drivers. Fortunately for WIN on its first night, Prime missed the story. It was also the day of one of the biggest fires in Sydney, in some inner-city woolsheds, which provided spectacular pictures.

The first rundown probably contained far too much local content and not enough national stories, but WIN was acutely aware of catering for its local market, so erred on

the local side. As staff sat in the control room and the Director counted into the headlines, “ten, nine, eight. . .” the atmosphere was extremely tense. The company’s General Manager and other executives were watching progress from another room. Memories of the disastrous opening night for WIN’s Canberra news bulletin, when stories continually failed to appear as announced and the embarrassed newsreader was left to fill in time live on air, were fresh in everyone’s mind. [East archive, notes July 1992]

TCN was kind that night; all the national stories arrived down the link in time, and all other aspects went smoothly. To add to the opening night drama, the floor manager, a work experience student, fainted from nerves halfway through the bulletin and lay unconscious on the studio floor until there was an appropriate break and someone could attend to him. Fortunately, he was not seriously hurt. [WIN media release, 7 July 1992] At the end of that half-hour, there was elation, congratulations and relief, but also apprehension. The staff knew they would be going through this stressful procedure every day.

The station initially received complaints that it had taken Nine newsreader Brian Henderson off air out west. One Dubbo farmer complained indignantly that WIN had deprived him of “Australia’s number one newsreader.” A few complained at the lack of national stories, a situation the station sought to rectify after that first night, while others accused it of neglecting the local area. Reaction from Prime was predictable, although former employee Michelle Larmer suggested Prime had a grudging admiration for WIN’s product:

There was skepticism about the idea of the combined news service, but no-one could deny the quality of the bulletin was very high. That led to a few changes at Prime; improvements to the news set, encouraging more stand-ups in stories, that sort of thing. [Larmer 1996, 1]

WIN sought co-operation with its rival on sharing material from some sporting fixtures and other similar events, and sometimes achieved it. As WIN in Wollongong had to learn

at the start of aggregation, competition in regional news was something all stations had to come to terms with.

That opening bulletin introduced unaccustomed practices at WIN's studios in Mount St Thomas, Wollongong. Just before six o'clock every weeknight, two separate sets were lit, two different newsreaders prepared to go on air, two sets of producers and directors put last-minute touches to two separate bulletins, all in rooms side by side. Wollongong viewers saw their own news service, oblivious to the fact that another local service was beaming out to a viewing area far away. As staff settled down to the daily grind of producing the program, there was optimism that the bulletin would come to be embraced by its viewing audience, and would be around for a long time. Following is an example of a bulletin shown in the combined western market under the integrated bulletin system (see Appendix 3, video tape).

1. Integrated bulletin, 30 June 1992

| |
|---|
| Headlines: Temora fatal, Greiner appeal, Superannuation |
| 1. Temora fatal |
| 2. Bathurst locos READ |
| 3. Superannuation |
| 4. Greiner appeal |
| 5. Student protest; RVO |
| 6. Country school numbers |
| Commercial Break |
| 7. Earthquake cleanup |
| 8. Blayney road funding |
| 9. World wrap; Algerian assassination, South Africa massacre, Princess Diana in Belfast |
| 10. Helicopter crash Queensland; RVO |
| 11. Tumut fire; READ |
| 12. Car crash Sydney |
| Commercial Break |
| 13. Group 11 League |
| 14. League ballet dancers |
| 15. Wimbledon |
| Commercial Break |
| 16. Weather |
| 17. Adelaide cat |

This was WIN's first rehearsal bulletin. The opener was generic because the program was a mixture of local and national news, and was broadcast to a large area of central and south western New South Wales. It was not possible therefore to use anything readily identified with a particular town or region. Thus, a neutral shot of the studio control room was used. Pictures in the headlines which related to national stories were recorded off the *Today* show, or taken from library footage. Sometimes important stories could not be headlined because the station had no advance vision to use in the headlines, which were put together in the studio at around four o'clock in the afternoon.

The lead story about the hit and run incident at Temora meant that the Wagga crew had to travel a long way from their base; in fact it was the only story they were able to produce on that day. This highlighted a common problem experienced during this phase of WIN's western news, and, to a lesser extent, throughout the exercise. Because there were only two crews covering approximately one third of the state, the choice of stories on a daily basis was dictated by the distance they could cover. If, for example, the Orange crew travelled to Mudgee to cover a story, they were obligated to find another story from the same area to fill the local space, while having to neglect other parts of the viewing area.

Sometimes this problem was overcome through the goodwill of the production cameramen employed by WIN in each bureau; while their role was to shoot and produce commercials, they would often help out if a fire or an accident happened while the news crew was out of the area. By and large though, the distances WIN was forced to cover tended to give a distorted picture of the day's events; it was not so much a case of "what happened in the central west today", as "what happened in the town visited by WIN's news crew today".

This first attempt at putting the integrated bulletin together highlighted the dangers posed by relying on the feed of TCN stories which began at 5pm. It was up to the producer, while awaiting late TCN stories, to shuffle stories around, giving instructions

to alter graphics, supers, tape machines, scripts etc as needed. On this occasion the Nick Greiner story (see above) was headlined as story two, but arrived just in time to be item four. The specialised Basys news computer system meant that the rundown could be rearranged very quickly, and often the rundown at the end of the bulletin bore very little resemblance to the initial plan at six o'clock.

The integrated bulletin also posed a challenge in story selection; whether to give priority to a strong local story such as the hit and run, or an obviously strong national story like the Greiner issue. WIN tended to lean towards local stories, unless the TCN story was of such importance that it would look ridiculous not to lead with it. Leading with a local story also gave an added bonus, in that the first minute or so of the bulletin, at least, could be planned ahead. Apart from TCN stories which had to be selected because of their importance, WIN also tended to choose stories which had some perceived relevance to the western area over parochial Sydney stories. For example, story number five about the student protest was chosen, because of the large university population in centres such as Bathurst and Wagga.

Local stories further down the rundown tended to have a more generic angle, for example, story six on country school numbers. While this item was shot and produced in Orange, the wider issue behind the story had some relevance to viewers in other parts of the region. Similarly, the Blayney road story was chosen because of its perceived interest to viewers generally concerned about the state of country roads.

The throw to the first commercial break was a good example of the sometimes curious mix in this bulletin; a story about country road funding, side by side with the aftermath of the Los Angeles earthquake! Story seven, on the earthquake, was taken from TCN's feed of international items at 1.40pm. While TCN would record these items from one of its international affiliates and use their own journalists to re-voice them, WIN often chose to go with the American version because at least the story would then be safely on

the shelf ready to go to air. It could never guarantee the TCN version would arrive in time.

Item nine, the “OS wrap” as it was called, became a regular part of the bulletin. Selected international stories would be edited together in a wrap of approximately 45 to 50 seconds, and voiced by the Wollongong-based western news journalist. The pictures would be taken off the 1.40 TCN feed and usually already had voice-overs from foreign reporters on them, so WIN’s version went to air without effects - background sounds usually heard under the voice-over.

Local content in this rehearsal bulletin was relatively low; to boost it, two reads were included. One, the Bathurst locos read, related to the central west audience, while the other, the Tumut fire, would have been of interest to viewers in the south west.

Sport was always a problem in this integrated format, because only one local item could be included each night due to time restrictions. This was particularly difficult around football grand final time when there were three large rugby league competitions and numerous other codes in the viewing area, all vying for coverage. In this example, Group 11 Rugby League at Dubbo was covered.

Deciding on the contents of the weather segment proved a particular challenge. Time limits meant that some towns in the large viewing area were simply not covered, and national weather was restricted to a brief look at a satellite map, and a summary of forecast temperatures at the end which was sometimes dropped if the bulletin was running late.

The final story in this bulletin was compiled from pictures recorded off the TCN current affairs program, *Today*, early in the morning, and re-voiced by the Wollongong-based journalist. The wrap of two light stories, the rescue of a cat in Adelaide and a study of

whales, was typical of the approach used in many news bulletins to leave the audience on a pleasant note after some of the disturbing stories earlier in the rundown.

The sample bulletin shows the approach taken in the integrated service, with the focus of stories ranging from parochial local issues to world events. However, by early 1993 it was becoming clear that the people of western New South Wales had not accepted this mingling of local and national news. There was a small core following, but the bulletin showed no signs of attaining the ratings success enjoyed by Prime in its two local bulletins at Wagga and Orange. [East archive, WIN internal memorandum February 1993]

The quality of the product was not in dispute; the format of the bulletin enabled the company to achieve a very high standard of news broadcasting, particularly when compared with the production quality displayed by its opposition. Under its integrated approach, WIN needed to cover only the best local stories and its reporters had more time to put their stories together; quite a luxury in regional news terms. But the general philosophy behind the format - the integration of local and national news - had been a ratings disappointment, with no sign of an increase in viewers over the life of the service. Whatever WIN thought of the format, however slick and polished it looked, it was apparent that the audience preferred to know everything that was going on in their home towns. They would rather see more local stories and a less polished product.

WIN had embarked on a very ambitious project with the integrated bulletin; trying to alter viewing habits established over thirty years of television in the western area. It was asking the viewing public to do three things; turn their back on the station they usually watched for news; re-think the boundaries of the viewing area they had come to accept to include other parts of the state they were not necessarily interested in; and adapt to a combination of local and national news in an area where the two had long been presented as separate entities. The company had apparently underestimated just how big an ask that was.

WIN management had to make some hard decisions. More than one million dollars had been poured into the establishment of Western news. To pull out completely would have wasted money and effort expended over a period of more than twelve months. The company still held a firm belief that it had a very strong news base and could offer a far superior product to that of Prime, if only it could hit on the right format to attract large numbers of viewers.

A number of alternatives were considered at length. Some of the original options were re-visited; broadcasting one of the existing half-hour bulletins to the western area, with a separate local window for the central and south west markets; broadcasting a five-minute local newsbreak at 6.25pm leading into National Nine News; and another alternative, a half-hour regional bulletin at 6pm, covering the entire western viewing area and leading into the national news. A variation of this third option was to broadcast a generic first break, covering the entire region, then splitting the second break into separate windows for the central and south west areas, then returning to the generic format for sport and weather.

However, WIN's Kerry Kingston felt strongly that the message from viewers was that they wanted more local news. WIN had experimented with a region-wide bulletin, albeit integrating national news as well, and it had not been well received. He felt that if the company was going to do it, it had to go all the way. It had to totally commit itself, and introduce separate half-hour local bulletins in each market; that is, a half-hour of local news broadcast in the Wagga south west region, and a completely separate bulletin for the Orange/Bathurst/Dubbo central west market. [East archive, notes July 1993]

The implications of this proposal were significant. If Western News Mark One had been expensive, Western News Mark Two would be even more so. WIN was facing a major expansion of facilities and the employment of numerous additional staff. It had no studio facilities in either region, its system of links was primitive and, in the case of Orange at

least, the two news staff were already cramped into what had been the building's kitchen. Yet the company was now considering going head-to-head with Prime in two markets, where their local news had been well-established for more than two decades. The idea was discussed more and more, and the decision was made; the company would take its commitment to news in the west seriously; it would take Prime head-on and offer exactly the same kind of service, only WIN's would be superior in its content and its presentation.

While these discussions took place, WIN continued to put its half-hour integrated local/national bulletin to air. Staff felt very daunted that at the same time as running a busy newsroom, new staff would have to be hired and crucial arrangements made for the new bulletin. Fortunately they were spared that prospect. Because the new service would be entirely different to WIN's existing offering, the decision was taken to cease broadcasting news out west, take time out to set up the new operation and, once staff felt they were ready, to begin the new services in earnest.

There can be few more disconcerting feelings for a journalist than working on a program which is being axed - even when its demise will make way for a much bigger project. There was the task of ringing each of the staff and explaining to them that the bulletin would cease on Friday 20 August 1993. WIN's news bulletin in the central and south west viewing areas of Approved Market C would simply go to air as usual on the Friday, and not return on the Monday. There was no question of retrenchments; in fact most of the staff would be upgraded and take on a much more strategic role in the new service. But it was unpleasant all the same; contemplating that the hard work of the last twelve months would end so abruptly. The staff were stunned at the thought of what lay ahead of them. They were encouraged to take holidays immediately after the bulletin ceased; there would be little to do until the format of the new bulletin emerged.

Work continued as usual for the next few weeks. The Wagga-based journalist resigned and the remaining staff were committed to staying with the company in the new venture.

Word of the decision began to reach the public; WIN had a publicity campaign to manage, telling people that it was upgrading its western news service on a large scale, and the shut-down of the bulletin would only be temporary.

The day came for the final bulletin in the integrated format. A story was compiled which outlined to viewers the plans for a new, improved service in their area, and it ran in the first break. [East archive, WIN western news rundown 20 August 1993] It was a strange day; knowing that certain tasks were being performed for the last time. But generally, staff were relieved to say good-bye to the integrated system. It was fraught with difficulties, particularly because WIN relied so heavily on TCN 9 and its feed-out of stories in the late afternoon. On one memorable occasion, the day after the federal budget was brought down, TCN's lead budget story failed to materialise in time and WIN actually ran its local follow-up story first, with a hastily re-written introduction. While the producer had control over the stories which originated from WIN's western bureaus, there was no control over what TCN did.

Sometimes the producer would have to "invent" introductions to stories seconds before the item was due to go to air, because the TCN journalist had not yet written their introduction, or it had not been saved in a file in the computer which WIN could access via modem. The "supers" in the stories - the name and title of the person interviewed which were superimposed on the screen underneath their face - were also a problem. Often the producer would have to get into the TCN script file and read the particular story, and try to guess from the text who the interview subject might be. The fact that they often succeeded was probably an indication of just how predictable some network news services had become.

Like any situation where a group of people are working under constant pressure, the integrated western news bulletin resulted in an extremely close-knit team of people who battled all sorts of problems to get the news to air each night. Some of the issues faced, like the live-to-air bulletin re-shuffling, had never been experienced at WIN before. It

tested all staff, and showed that when the pressure was on, they could function as a highly professional and disciplined unit. There is no doubt that had they not had to face those challenges in the integrated format, they would have found it extremely difficult to measure up in the new format.

When the closing music rolled for the last time, there were cheers in the control room, and a party afterwards. The staff all felt that a product of very high quality had come to an end, but there was also relief that the stress of producing such a high-risk program would ease, at least for a while.

Following is the rundown and an analysis of the final bulletin in the integrated format (see Appendix 3, video tape):

| 20 August 1993 | |
|---|--|
| Headlines; Potter/Chain letter/Budget | |
| 1. Potter release | |
| 2. Fatal near Dubbo; READ | |
| 3. Chain letter scam | |
| 4. Police shooting; Sydney | |
| 5. End of Western News | |
| Commercial Break | |
| 6. Queensland baby attempted murder; READ | |
| 7. Budget story | |
| 8. Gundagai ambulance station | |
| 9. Other news READ | |
| 10. World wrap | |
| Commercial Break | |
| 11. Cricket test | |
| 12. Rugby league; Group 10 | |
| 13. Athletics; World championships | |
| Stocks/Commercial Break | |
| 14. Weather | |
| 15. Canoe trip from Bathurst | |
| 16. Montage of western news | |

By the time this bulletin went to air, the original Wagga-based journalist had left, and WIN used a casual reporter for its final day. On this occasion a TCN story led the bulletin due to a lack of anything local that was suitable. However, to keep the local

presence near the top of the bulletin, WIN ran a “read” on a fatal accident near Dubbo. The following item about the chain letter was shot by a stringer at Dubbo, and put onto the XPT to Orange for scripting and editing.

Story five was an unashamed promotional piece for the upcoming change to two half-hour bulletins. The hardest task was to explain to viewers that the existing bulletin would disappear off the screen, to be replaced by a new product later in the year. Item seven, the budget story, was intended to be run after the chain letter story in the first break. Federal political stories out of Canberra were notorious for being late on the feed, and this was no exception. Item nine, the “other news read” had become a regular feature of the integrated format as another means of keeping up local content. It would often consist of three or four paragraphs, each relating to a different story from around the viewing area.

In the sport break, the cricket story was seized on for definite inclusion in the rundown because it arrived on the 1.40 feed due to the international time difference. The following rugby league item started as a national story, then ran into an item about league in the central west. The stock report, shown just before the third commercial break, was a daily problem. Details had to be chased from the stock exchange, and often did not arrive until the last minute. Sometimes they were typed onto the graphic during the story immediately preceding the report. The end of this bulletin marked the close of the first phase of WIN’s foray into western news, and was recognised with a montage of stories from the past year.

Dual Bulletins

With the integrated bulletin now off air, WIN began to work in earnest towards a start-up date for its new bulletins. There seemed no end to the issues to be considered. It appeared that the News Director’s workload, already heavy, would double under the new format. Instead of one western New South Wales bulletin comprised of half local and half national news, WIN would have two completely local half-hour bulletins, one

based around Wagga for the south west and another, focusing on Orange, Bathurst and Dubbo, for the central west. It would need to produce, on average, twelve or thirteen stories for each bulletin every night, in areas not renowned for their news value.

The issue of logistics was particularly challenging. All WIN's studio facilities were in Wollongong, WIN's headquarters. It was decided that both bulletins would be broadcast out of Wollongong. The Wagga bulletin would be pre-recorded using the main studio, Studio A, and replayed at 6pm, and the Orange bulletin would go live at 6pm, also out of Studio A. The Illawarra bulletin would continue to be broadcast live to air at 6pm from the second studio, Studio B.

The company ran a general advertisement for journalists and camera operators to work in the WIN network. It was not specific about where people might be posted - it wanted to see what the field was like before making any firm decisions. The response was overwhelming. More than 100 hopefuls applied for the journalist positions alone. [East archive, WIN Western employment applications 1993]

Many different configurations of staff were considered for the new programs; finally it was decided to staff the south west bulletin with four journalists and three camera operators in Wagga. The central west service would have three journalists and camera operators in Orange with the fourth central west reporter based in Dubbo with a camera operator to be shared with the production department. Two journalists would operate out of Wollongong to assist the News Director; one dedicated to producing sports stories for the south west bulletin, the other for the central west bulletin. Covering sport from a distance was certainly not the ideal scenario, but it was the only way to keep some additional staff based in Wollongong. The alternative would have been the News Director shouldering the entire production responsibility alone, and the quality of the bulletins would have ultimately suffered.

In Wollongong, the company also had one tape editor dedicated to western news. His highly demanding role would be to take feeds of all the sport material from the other offices, edit up to six sport stories per day (three for each bulletin), and record the incoming finished news stories from all areas at the end of the day, ready to go to air.

The need to economise also dictated the grading of staff, and helped to eliminate many of the applicants. Both of the bureaus would have a Chief of Staff who would be a senior (A grade) journalist, there would be one B grade in each region, and the other two journalists would be relatively junior, either D graders or cadets. The two journalists to be based in Wollongong would also be from junior grades. This was risky; embarking on a major news venture without the benefit of experienced staff. To compound the problem, it was soon discovered that hiring people with television experience was going to be difficult, especially for a bureau like Wagga which seemed to hold little attraction for many aspirants. Those with substantial experience were too expensive for the budget; the remainder were either print journalists seeking to broaden their horizons, and hopefuls straight from university. As well, many of the applicants lived interstate, and the budget did not allow for travel. Consequently, a number of people were hired over the phone, without the mutual benefit of a face-to-face interview.

After a lengthy recruitment process, the staffing was finalised. There was a team of ten journalists, seven camera operators and a tape editor, who had never met each other and would work from four different offices around the state. It seemed essential that they all get together at least once in the course of launching the programs. Because of the numbers involved, and the lack of space to work in, it was decided to have all the journalists in Wollongong for one week, and the camera staff a few weeks later.

The four Wagga journalists decided to travel to Wollongong together. This in itself was a strange experience, because they had not met before. The Chief of Staff was recruited from Queensland, the B grader from Cootamundra. The D grade came from the *Daily Advertiser* in Wagga, and the cadet, from a production position at Prime in Albury. The

Orange journalists had at least met each other beforehand but they, too, came from various places. The Orange-based journalist from the previous bulletin took the position of Chief of Staff, her B grade, based in Dubbo, came from NBN at Tamworth, and the D grade and cadet were new to the media.

In Wollongong, one of the staff had been with the company for some time as the sports journalist for the previous bulletin, but the second journalist, recently retrenched from the Southern Cross network due to budget cuts, came from South Australia and had never been to Wollongong before his first day working at WIN.

The training week was filled with formal meetings to discuss plans and informal gatherings to try to bond the staff together into a cohesive unit. Some of the new journalists needed extensive training in writing, voice work and on-camera presenting. Many hours were spent out in the carpark with a camera operator borrowed from the Wollongong newsroom as one or other of the new staff practised doing standups, or in the edit suite refining their voice-over technique.

By the end of the week much ground had been covered, and everyone left to go back to their respective regions. At this stage there was no on-air date for either bulletin. The station management had made it quite clear that the service would not go to air until the staff were ready, and in the case of Orange, the facilities were not yet in place. The company was looking around for another building to house the expanded bureau, and negotiations were taking some time. In Wagga, major renovations of the existing building were required, to accommodate two new edit suites for the bulletin. [East archive, notes October 1993]

While the journalists had been meeting and training, moves were underway to finalise the hiring of the camera staff and purchase of the large amount of additional equipment needed for the expanded service. The plan was that the crews in the two main bureaus, Orange and Wagga, would shoot and edit the news for that day and send the completed

stories via link to Wollongong for transmission. There would be no designated tape editors based out west, so the camera operators doubled as editors. This broke the practice previously in place at WIN, where each regional newsroom had designated camera operators and separate tape editors. However, it reflected the system used by the opposition, Prime.

Much of the sport material was shot over the weekend, and either fed via link to Wollongong on Sunday afternoon or early Monday, or, in the case of stories not required until later in the week, sent in an overnight mail-bag from the bureau to Wollongong. The Wollongong-based sport journalists would then follow up details of the matches by phone. In the case of Dubbo, which had no edit suite and only "half" a camera operator (who had to spend half his time shooting commercials for production), stories had to be written and voiced by the Dubbo-based journalist, then fed via Telecom link from an external feed point just outside the city. The raw material was recorded in Wollongong, and the story put together by WIN's Wollongong-based tape editor

A major drawback of this system was that the feed had to be sent via TCN 9 at a time convenient to them. This meant that the material was fed at 12.30 each day - leaving the Dubbo crew only a few hours to find, shoot and write at least two stories. The Wagga-based crew in the previous bulletin also had to use the Telecom link system to send their material; now, at least, the company installed its own link to enable the Wagga material to be sent to Wollongong.

The journalists would write their stories in computers equipped with the Basys system. The Chief of Staff's computer in each office, and the Dubbo-based journalist's computer, had the capacity to dial into the Wollongong system via modem and transfer all the introductions for that day. The producer would sort them out into their correct order in the rundown, organise the supers for each story, and look after elements like headlines and playoffs - the comments made by the reader at the end of each segment going into a commercial break.

With the staff beginning to settle into their new surroundings and the bulk of the equipment installed, it was decided to introduce five-minute newsbreaks into the western area to give the audience a taste of what was to come. It also gave the new journalists valuable practice before the full news service began. The Orange staff were still operating out of their existing premises, but had re-arranged office space to minimise the inconvenience. [East archive, WIN internal memorandum November 1993]

Other issues had to be resolved, down to the finest detail. New openers were made based on the National Nine News theme but with an appearance which related directly to the particular viewing area. For the Wagga bulletin, a night shot of the city was used. For Orange, the decision proved more difficult. Unlike the Riverina market, based around one large city, the central west bulletin took in three cities, Bathurst, Orange and Dubbo, and numerous large towns, each with their own identity. It was hard to pick one landmark which represented the whole area. In the end WIN opted for a shot of cattle crossing a road, a decision which drew comment, not always kind, from within and outside the station.

There was also the task of putting together a format for the weather segments in each bulletin. Again, these varied because of the geographic nature of the two regions. A lot of time was spent examining Prime's weather report, and working out ways of getting information from the various towns, many of them not covered by the Weather Bureau. In some cases, this meant ringing the post office every afternoon and asking what the temperature had been that day. The camera crews had to be organised to go out and shoot weather background shots, catering for all meteorological contingencies.

While WIN prepared for the start of newsbreaks, the Wollongong-based staff had decided that the only way to survive on a day-to-day basis was with a comprehensive and effective plan. With two sets of feeds coming down, sport stories and Dubbo items to edit, headlines, playoff and graphics to organise for two separate bulletins, they were

aware that the potential for a major on-air disaster was considerable. They decided to adopt colour-coding for every item associated with the bulletins; yellow for Wagga and green for Orange (stationery stock did not allow orange for Orange). All tapes to be used on air bore either yellow or green labels. Rundowns were highlighted with yellow or green marker pens. The tape "leaders" placed at the head of newsbreaks etc, had either yellow or green backgrounds.

The News Director's day would go like this:

8.30am; Ring Orange and Wagga Chief of Staff to discuss stories for the day. From those discussions, formulate an initial rundown, or lists of stories, for each area. Also, discuss sport stories with two sport journalists and add into rundown.

9am; Provide tape editor with a list of graphics for each bulletin, based on the story list as known. Also, alert him to any library vision which had to come from Wollongong or TCN, and be edited into a story from out west. Give him a list of sport stories to be cut that day.

10am; Prepare two separate newsbreaks to be recorded and broadcast into each viewing area at around 11.15. Go to studio and present newsbreaks.

Update the news library from previous day, making sure tape numbers and visual cues were recorded in computer system for future reference.

Mid-morning; Oversee flow of sport stories being written, and sub-edit scripts. Scripts would come via modem from Dubbo for sub-editing.

Midday; Liaise with Chief of Staff on updated rundown. Finish rundowns and fax back to bureaus, highlighting any vision which camera operators had to send down for headlines and playoffs.

12.30; Dubbo feed; oversee recording of feed and editing of stories.

Early afternoon; story introductions should be flowing in from Wagga and Orange. Check them for mistakes, put into appropriate rundown, print off six copies of each for production crew.

Write headlines and plugs for each bulletin, and write as much of evening newsbreak as possible.

2.30pm; Headline and playoff feed from Wagga.

2.45pm; Headline and playoff feed from Orange.

3.30pm; Print out list of supers and colour code for each bulletin, check graphics for each bulletin, and distribute rundowns and lists to studio crew for production of graphics, headlines, playoff etc.

Continue to transfer introductions into rundown and print, complete newsbreaks for each bulletin.

Chase up weather details.

4pm; Wagga stories fed to Wollongong.

Oversee sorting of scripts into correct order, and splitting into six different piles.

4.45pm; Production meeting for Wagga bulletin; involving producer, director, floor manager, newsreaders, director's assistant.

5-5.30pm; Produce Wagga bulletin (pre-recorded).

5pm; Orange stories fed to Wollongong.

5.30pm; Production meeting for Orange bulletin.

6-6.30pm; Oversee production of live Orange bulletin.

Oversee editing of newsbreaks for both areas.

[East archive, WIN internal memorandum November 1993]

Newsbreaks began in November 1993. These were pre-recorded in the late afternoon and put to air at 6.25pm, leading into the National News. After a somewhat shaky start, WIN got into a rhythm and staff began to feel more comfortable.

The issue of the new Orange building still had not been resolved, but management decided to announce an on-air date for Wagga in December. The thinking was that it was a good time to begin, given the popularity of the cricket shown on WIN. Hopefully the new bulletin could capitalise on the larger-than-normal cricket season viewing audience who might leave their set tuned to WIN after the match had finished.

It was necessary to have a week of dress rehearsals leading up to the on-air day. This posed a new challenge; newsbreaks were going to air in Wagga, and WIN did not want to stop them until the day the bulletin began in earnest. It therefore had to produce five minutes of real news for Wagga which would actually go to air, and half an hour of rehearsal news for the bulletin. At the same time, the Orange five minute bulletin also needed to be produced.

Shooting stories for a rehearsal bulletin brought other difficulties; it was not easy to ask politicians and other people in the community to do interviews that would never get to air. WIN risked alienating some of the people it wanted very much to get on side. It got around the problem by covering real stories, but shooting fake interviews; the journalists would interview each other, or the cameramen, or other staff in the station. This at least provided some material to work with. Other genuine stories were put together which

could be held over until the bulletin was on air. The station was very mindful of the need to build up a stock of stories to cover for the first few weeks, in case it had difficulties in filling the full half hour. It made the most of the fact that the Orange journalists were not very busy during this time, and rotated them in visits to Wagga. They concentrated on outlying townships and shot a variety of holding stories.

Even though the air date for the new Orange bulletin was some way off, it was decided to go ahead with pre-recording the Wagga bulletin at 5pm. This would introduce the discipline of having everything ready an hour earlier than in the previous western bulletin. There was concern that if staff got into the habit of starting the Wagga recording late, it could cause major problems once the live Orange bulletin was on air. WIN needed a minimum of half an hour turnaround time between the end of the Wagga recording and the start of the Orange bulletin at 6pm, not only to finalise details for Orange but to give the studio crew a break after a very intense half hour.

It was also strongly felt that the Wagga bulletin should have a “live” feel about it. In the lead-up to the introduction of the bulletin, WIN’s opposition, Prime, had made much of the pre-recorded issue and the fact that the bulletin was actually being broadcast out of Wollongong, a long way from the viewers, with presenters who had no affinity with the local western area. It was determined that if there were mistakes during the recording, staff should continue on as if it were a live situation. [East archive, WIN internal memorandum November 1993] In the early stages this brought conflict with some presenters and production people, who felt the process should stop and mistakes be corrected to make the bulletin appear perfect. Occasionally problems occurred that were so serious there was no option but to stop and pick up from where the recording left off; however this was only done with great reluctance. There was also great security on that first night, in the knowledge that the recording could stop if absolutely necessary. This took much of the opening-night edge off the proceedings.

It was comforting in those first few weeks to watch the bulletin go to air at six o'clock from its tape machine (with a back-up machine standing by), knowing that all had gone smoothly in the recording. It meant the News Director could give more attention to the journalists' work, and, where necessary, provide advice and suggestions.

A frustration which arose early on came from the fact that many of the staff were from outside the area, including presenters. In one of the first bulletins, WIN mispronounced the name of a very well known Wagga cricketer. Sometimes names of towns and suburbs were mispronounced, immediately telegraphing WIN's lack of local knowledge to viewers. Sometimes the recording of newsbreaks had to be held up, while staff telephoned one of the bureaus and tried to find someone who was a local, to clarify a pronunciation.

By early 1994, production of the Wagga bulletin was proceeding smoothly. General comments heard around the viewing area by the local crews were favourable, with many people noticing the bulletin's professional presentation. However, the company did get at least one call from someone who complained that they were bamboozled by the sight of the pictures being "flashed before their eyes". WIN had deliberately set out to counter Prime's habit of letting edited shots run for ten seconds or more in stories, and were trying for a more city-style appearance. It seemed this approach was not appreciated by everyone.

For the journalists, finding sufficient material to fill half an hour each day was a challenge as WIN had not yet had time to build up its local contacts. Prime often beat them to good stories because of local knowledge. WIN was also hampered, although not as much as first thought, by its early recording time. Prime could put stories to air right up until the end of its bulletin. WIN's Wagga stories had to be fed to Wollongong between four and five o'clock. Sometimes, in the case of a very strong late story, the producer allowed the recording to be held up for a few minutes so it got to air, or it was fed down

during the recording and slotted in when it was ready. The previous western bulletin had provided ample practice at that manoeuvre.

The camera crews were also finding the going tough, with their requirements to shoot and edit stories. They also had to take turns at being on call out of hours in case of emergency stories, and working on weekends to shoot sport and feed the pictures to Wollongong. Crews often had to travel long distances for stories; in the previous western bulletin this had not posed a major problem because if one of the crews had to travel out of town for the day, they only filed that one story and the bulletin was filled with national material. But, under the new system, they had to travel away from their base and still come up with between two and three stories a day, written and edited by the four o'clock feed time.

WIN had successfully negotiated to buy a building in Orange, and it was renovated to include new facilities for news. By February 1994, the company was ready to launch the Orange bulletin. As with Wagga, WIN needed to continue the five minute newsbreaks up until the on-air date. At the same time, it was doing the recorded Wagga bulletin, and a "live" rehearsal bulletin for Orange. This certainly tested all involved, but staff were well adapted to the system by this time and problems were kept to a minimum.

The Orange launch date came, and the bulletin went to air smoothly. Like the Wagga program, the bulletin attracted favourable comment with the occasional brickbat for a mispronunciation or the fact that the weather presenter remarked cheerfully about "wonderful blue skies and no sign of rain" during one of the worst droughts in living memory. It was highly satisfying, between six and six-thirty, to switch to WIN's in-house channel with its screen split into four, and watch different news bulletins go to air simultaneously in four different markets; Wollongong, Canberra, central west and south west. [East archive, WIN internal memorandum February 1994]

The three Orange-based journalists and three camera operators were particularly affected by the travel issue. Virtually every day, one crew had to travel to Bathurst to cover stories and then make the hour-long trip back to meet editing deadlines. The company considered basing a journalist in Bathurst, but there were too many logistical problems. Other centres such as Cowra, Lithgow and Mudgee had to be covered, and great faith had to be placed in the stringer operating in Parkes/Forbes.

Often planning to get the tape back to base proved as much of a challenge as actually shooting the story. WIN continued to utilise the XPT service between Dubbo and Orange, with the Dubbo crew handing their tape to the guard for pick-up at Orange railway station, and tapes still went astray on occasion. In general, though, the Orange staff had some advantages over their Wagga colleagues, with most Dubbo stories edited in Wollongong, and the live-to-air bulletin giving them a later editing deadline.

WIN was also keen to capitalise on any stories which were relevant to both viewing areas. For example, the town of Young sat approximately halfway between the two areas, so virtually anything supplied by the stringer based at Young could be shown in both bulletins. Even producing one less story per day made a great deal of difference to everyone's stress levels. As well, there were certain generic stories, relating to rural issues and the like, which could be run in both areas. Sometimes the Orange journalist, for example, would interview a visiting federal minister about an issue relating to the central west, and also ask questions about a Riverina issue. Two versions of the story were then produced.

As discussed previously, this practice was used throughout the wider WIN network and by other regional stations. If a sporting event was held in Wollongong between teams from the Illawarra and Bathurst, the story could be used in both markets. Regional carnivals, involving teams from all areas, were seen as a major bonus. A crew went to the Royal Easter Show and came back with stories for Wollongong, Wagga and Orange and used the same stand-up in each. It gave rise to certain jokes; a cameraman would go

to cover a car accident in Wollongong, and quip that he asked the people involved if they were from Wagga, or if they had ever been to Cowra. The record rested with a murder in the town of Reids Flat, in the centre of all four viewing areas. Canberra ran the story saying "Reids Flat, near Goulburn". Wollongong ran it, describing the location as "Reids Flat, near Picton". For Wagga and Orange, it was "Reids Flat, near Young". [East archive, notes February 1994]

Later, with ever-tightening budgets at WIN, stories were run between bulletins without re-cutting to make them more specific to the particular viewing area. This had the effect of local identity being lost. For example, a story on a hockey carnival in Wollongong was aired in the central west, purely on the grounds that "Bathurst" was mentioned as one of the teams involved. The bulk of the story related to a match report which would have been of little or no interest to central west viewers.

The issue of identity had never been an easy one to tackle. Prime had been in the area, in one form or another, for more than three decades. The newsreaders of the Prime bulletins in both markets were looked on by viewers as dear and trusted friends, and the journalists were all household names. By the same token, complacency had led Prime to alienate some people. Under the old news monopoly, they had had no pressure to cover certain stories if they chose not to. WIN was able to take advantage of that, and follow up issues which previously had been neglected.

Following are examples of bulletins shown in the south west and central west markets under the dual bulletin system (see Appendix 3, video tape):

2. Dual bulletins

Wagga bulletin: 27 June 1995

| |
|---|
| Headlines: Wagga robber, Coota trees, Wagga tigers |
| 1. Cootamundra trees |
| 2. Hume Highway smash RVO |
| 3. Wagga robber identikit |
| 4. Farmers' electricity scheme; READ |
| 5. Rural centre opening |
| Commercial Break |
| 6. Kendall airlines expands; READ |
| 7. Council wrap |
| 8. San Isadore special care home |
| 9. Customer service workshop |
| 10. Lloyd Rees exhibition |
| Commercial Break |
| 11. Wagga tigers; RFL |
| 12. Riverina rugby |
| 13. Basketball |
| Commercial break |
| 14. Weather |
| 15. School band at Ganmain |

This bulletin, and the following Orange bulletin, were recorded just before the dual bulletin system gave way to a regional half hour program. The new, generic opener is already in evidence, replacing the shot of Wagga at night. The presenter, Leith Mulligan, had replaced the previous Wagga newsreader, Michelle Larmer, and after reading the pre-recorded Wagga bulletin at 5pm, he would go on to read the live Orange program at 6pm. The leader at the start of the tape indicates that the bulletin was indeed pre-recorded. It is also apparent that only three journalists from Wagga were working on this particular day, instead of the standard five.

The first story in the bulletin, Cootamundra trees, was actually headlined at number two. This indicated that the first story, on the Wagga robber identikit, was not linked from Wagga in time to place it at the start of the bulletin. Story number two, the reader voice-over on the Hume Highway accident, was a good example of networking within the regional television system. This story was shot by WIN's Canberra newsroom, at a

location approximately half-way between Canberra and Wagga. It was therefore an ideal candidate to run in two markets. The Wagga and Canberra newsrooms had been known to take it in turns to cover anything happening in this “neutral territory” area.

In story three, the item intended to be the lead story, the graphic would have been produced in Wollongong and edited into the all-but-complete story after it was fed from Wagga. These late edits often placed considerable strain on the Wollongong-based tape editor, particularly on days when a number of stories from both bulletins required material to be inserted. The yellow and green tag system came into its own in these situations.

Item number five was a clear indicator of the direction intended for the western news service, and an example of less effective sharing of stories. The introduction suggested the story was about a new rural centre about to be opened at Junee, in the Wagga viewing area. However, the reader said the centre was identical to a complex opened that day in Parkes, which was in fact in the Orange bulletin viewing area. On the basis of that link, Wagga viewers were then shown a full report on the opening of the Parkes centre. The only relevance to the Wagga market was the mention of the Junee centre in the introduction. The story, compiled in Orange and showing inferior sound quality, was shot by a stringer cameraman based in Parkes. It is also interesting to consider that during the story the spokesman for Pivot mentioned “Port Kembla”, which would presumably make the story, or at least a re-cut version, suitable to be shown in the Wollongong market.

The first commercial break provided a useful view of aggregation in practice. There was a mix of highly-polished advertisements made for a national audience, commercials made by city-based operators for a generic country market (AgrEvo), and locally-produced advertisements made specifically for the Wagga market - although the Hillis Ford commercial featured the voice-over of Bruce Pulford, based in Wollongong.

Item number six, the read about Kendall Airlines, mentioned the crisis faced by Orange-based Hazelton airlines. In the following Orange bulletin, a full tape story about Hazelton was shown. This story had the potential to be shown in the Wagga market under WIN's philosophy of the time of sharing stories between bulletins where there was perceived to be a general interest by viewers. Stories seven, eight and nine were typical of second-break stories shown in the Wagga bulletin. Item ten was an interesting ring-in; a story about an art exhibition in Bathurst, with no apparent link to the Wagga viewing area. Presumably this story was used to inject a bit of colour into the break, and attempt to get the audience used to seeing news from out of the area.

The sport stories were also typical of the Wagga area, with a much heavier emphasis on Australian Football than the central west market with its strong rugby league following would have required. Interestingly, in story thirteen, players in the Wagga Heat basketball team had Prime's logo emblazoned on their uniforms.

The second commercial break showed further variations of advertisers' preferences in an aggregated market; the very country-specific but generic water tank commercial, and the advertisement for Furniture One, a version of a national commercial made specifically for the Riverina market.

In the weather, presenter Phil Diamond (also the sport presenter in this bulletin), referred to "parts of the viewing area". This sort of reference was common in aggregated regional television, where viewing areas did not always fit neatly into recognised geographic areas. The Wagga bulletin was based on the Riverina, but also took in other areas. The "Junior Forecaster" competition was an example of an attempt to attract ratings and promote the station's local identity (albeit from a studio located hundreds of kilometres away).

The presenter referred to the satellite map, but the map did not appear. This was a common problem in the Wagga bulletin, because of its early recording time. The satellite

map was fed down by TCN 9 during its daily 5pm network feed of stories. Sometimes it would arrive in time to be slotted neatly into the weather as the segment was recorded. More often than not, it would arrive too late and be edited afterwards onto the master tape, then kept in readiness for the live Orange bulletin.

The weather segment had a heavy emphasis on rainfall, with all rainfall recorded in the region that day reported, along with the dam levels. Special arrangements had to be made with water authorities very early on in the development of the western bulletins, to ensure the dam information was faxed down daily. When it did not arrive, educated guesses had to be made. For obvious reasons, although perhaps not obvious to viewers, the weather contained no reference to current weather conditions, such as “outside at the moment it’s 20 degrees”.

The stock report was another ring-in from the Orange bulletin, and had no immediate link to the Wagga viewing area, other than a presumed general interest in stock results on the part of local farmers. In earlier bulletins, separate stock reports were done for each market.

The final story in the Wagga bulletin was a good example of the perceived benefits of a purely local news service. A story of this calibre of news value was very appropriate at the end of a half hour of local news, but would have no place in a national, or even an integrated regional bulletin. It gave local people a chance to see themselves, or in this case their children, on television, and from the operator’s point of view, was a good ratings prospect as each child featured in the story would have a number of friends and relatives who would probably make a point of watching.

| |
|---|
| Headlines: Hazelton, Water, Country Football |
| 1. Hazelton share crisis |
| 2. Fatal accidents; READ |
| 3. Water shortage |
| 4. Electricity scheme; READ |
| 5. Water recycling |
| Commercial Break |
| 6. Weekend detention centre |
| 7. New rural centre |
| 8. Tourism winner |
| Commercial Break |
| 9. Country football |
| 10. Group 11 League |
| 11. Dubbo Kart club |
| Commercial Break |
| 12. Weather |
| 13. Parkes-Eugowra bed push |

This bulletin had the same opener as the previous Wagga bulletin, as it was broadcast in the weeks before the changeover to a new regional program. In general, the Orange bulletin was of superior quality to the Wagga version in many respects; story content, quality of pictures, and journalistic quality. This could be attributed to a number of factors; while towns in the central west area were smaller in population than Wagga, the fact that there were a number of major centres in the region, in Bathurst, Orange and Dubbo, along with other towns of substantial size, meant a greater spread of stories. Each centre had its own local government area with its own style of politics and controversial issues, and each had major infrastructure such as Charles Sturt University, the former Edgells factory and a major prison at Bathurst, Hazelton Airlines near Orange, and Western Plains Zoo at Dubbo. The south west area, on the other hand, was based on one large city, with very few towns of substantial size around it.

The Orange bulletin on this occasion began with a story on the Hazelton share crisis - an item mentioned by way of a read in the Wagga bulletin, but not considered to be of sufficient interest to the southern region to warrant running the full videotape story. The

second item, a read on two separate fatal accidents, highlighted the enormous distances requiring coverage in the central west area. Getting pictures of these accidents, near Nyngan and Mudgee, would have been impossible unless a crew had happened to be in the area covering something else. Even then, it would have been very difficult to get the vision back to Orange in time for airing that night.

Story three, on the water shortage, originated from Dubbo and the crew based there but relied heavily on file footage. Water seemed to be a popular theme on this day, with a water recycling story also run in the first break and the two water stories broken up by a read on the electricity scheme, which had earlier been used in the Wagga bulletin.

The content mix in the commercial breaks was similar to that seen in Wagga; nationally-produced commercials combined with local advertisements, and national ads with a local “tag” on the end, such as the computer commercial in the first break.

Item six was an example of an issue discussed earlier; that of structuring the bulletin around the towns visited that day. This story was about a weekend detention centre planned for Bathurst and featured file pictures of the Bathurst Jail. However, the interview and standup were shot in Cowra, and the story was angled more at the fact that Cowra missed out on the detention centre than that Bathurst won it. The reason was revealed in story eight, about the winner of a tourism award, based in Cowra. The crew had to make the most out of its trip to that town, and could not afford the time to travel to Bathurst, a substantial drive in the opposite direction from Orange.

Story seven, on the new rural centre, was also run in Wagga but with a different introduction from the reader. This was a common practice during this phase of western news; to “localise” a story by wording the introduction to give it a more parochial slant than the contents of the story actually warranted.

In sport, the lead story about country football was a generic item which was used on different days on various stations in the WIN network. The reference to “southern and western” regions in the story indicated its suitability to the wider viewing audience. In the following Group 11 story, there should presumably have been a graphic at the end of the item when the remaining scores were read. Production of sport graphics placed constant pressure on production facilities in Wollongong, and sometimes the graphics had to be dropped because the studio was unable to produce them in time.

The commercial break after sport contained another national commercial with a local ending, for Fletcher Fotographics, and several locally-produced advertisements.

In the weather, Diamond made reference to the fact that the fog did not lift until late in the day, information supplied over the phone from the Orange office. The satellite photo, absent from the previous Wagga pre-recording, arrived in time to be broadcast live in the Orange bulletin. The weather segment followed the same general format as the Wagga program, but the size of the central west viewing area meant that four Weather Bureau regions had to be covered. The same stock report was shown in both bulletins, another indicator of the rationalisation to come. Previously, separate parochial stock reports would have been presented in each local bulletin.

Regional Bulletin

During 1995, there were a number of major staff changes, including a new News Director, and a new Chief of Staff in Wagga. Ratings had been increasing slowly, but in the all-consuming quest to attract a larger audience, WIN management decided a change in the news reading line-up was warranted. Until that point, the Wagga and Orange bulletins had had separate newsreaders, with the same sport and weather presenters working on both programs. Both newsreaders had been young women, seen as a contrast to the somewhat conservative-looking male presenters on the opposition station. In Wagga, WIN’s presenter Michelle Larmer had formerly read the news on Prime, so was already well known in the region. In Orange, the reader was chosen from

the stable of presenters already employed by WIN in Wollongong but unknown in the central west. It had initially been felt that it was too much for one person to present two bulletins within the space of an hour.

The news reading issue highlighted another dilemma faced by aggregated stations attempting to produce bulletins to several separate viewing areas from the one source. Both western newsreaders were also employed as journalists in WIN's Wollongong newsroom and were essentially lost to that newsroom from about 1.30pm each day, when they had to go to the hairdresser and to make-up in readiness to present afternoon newsbreaks and then the main bulletins. That inevitably put a strain on staffing levels in Wollongong, and if production of stories was running late as it often was, the western readers arrived in a highly flustered state.

It was decided to do away with the idea of separate readers and have the same presenter working on both programs. The company opted this time for a young male; still a contrast to the older readers on Prime, but a change from the young women seen on WIN. The Wollongong newsroom would only lose one of its journalists halfway through the afternoon instead of two, the western team would learn to cope with one reader, and hopefully the viewing public would respond positively to the change.

The move was in fact a step towards the inevitable; ratings continued to flounder and by mid 1995 WIN management decided the dual bulletin system was far too costly for the audience it was attracting. The decision was taken to combine the two bulletins into one, but unlike the initial western bulletin which was an integration of regional and national stories, this would be a half hour of local news taking in the entire western viewing area. Ironically, this scenario had been rejected when deliberations were underway to find an alternative to the first western bulletin. It was felt then that such a bulletin would satisfy neither end of the audience spectrum; with not enough local news for the die-hard country viewers, but too much for those who might have been attracted to the first bulletin. [Bell 1996, 1]

To further save money on the venture, the company opted to retain the pre-recorded system. The new bulletin would be recorded at 5pm as the Wagga bulletin had been and the Wollongong bulletin would move into the Studio A control room for its live bulletin at 6pm. Only one studio and floor crew would be required, where previously two teams had been needed to cope with the two live six o'clock bulletins for Wollongong and Orange, broadcast from different studios and control rooms.

The regional bulletin was phased in over a few months. The opener at the start of the two bulletins was changed to a generic view of a wheat field. Some stories from the central west bulletin began to creep into the Wagga program and vice versa. Staff were redeployed within the network; Orange retained a Chief of Staff, a news and a sport reporter, and a journalist at Dubbo, and Wagga kept a senior journalist and one other reporter. Each bureau was assigned two camera crews and Dubbo retained its half share in a production cameraman.

The decision also underlined the trend towards generic regional stories, particularly coverage of rural issues which were not specific to any part of the viewing area. This marked a new stage in WIN's western news coverage; from the initial western bulletin which covered only the strongest stories in each part of the market, to the dual half hour bulletins which involved coverage of often inferior-quality stories because of the need to fill space, to a new product which was half-way between the offerings of its predecessors. The transformation was carried out without fanfare; the hope was that viewers would not even notice the change. To some extent, viewers were already accustomed to seeing news from a wide area of the state due to the geographic distribution of the various markets; viewers in Wagga, for example, had up until that point frequently seen stories about events and issues in Narrandera and Griffith. Orange people had become familiar with happenings in Dubbo and areas as far afield as Nyngan and Coonabarabran. Now, the entire area was merged into one as it had been for the initial integrated bulletin, but this time the complete half hour had to be filled with

regional stories of sufficient interest to viewers to keep them tuned in for the duration. Where localism was once emphasised, now it was down-played to achieve a wider, regional focus.

Andrew Bell, then the News Director, said the main problem, like the earlier integrated bulletin only more so, was determining what would appeal to an audience which had been used to a certain geographical area being reflected on its television screen. It also required a change in the way stories had been presented thus far, making them even more generic and less tied to a specific locality.

That proved particularly difficult in a genre of news in which the location was often at the very heart of the story, with one of the journalist's tasks to ensure the name of the area appeared prominently - usually in the first paragraph of the introduction - giving the story a definite local angle and presumably, making it of immediate interest to the audience. According to Bell, it was a difficult habit to break:

We actually had to turn that around. We had to re-learn regional television if you like. By saying "Coonabarabran" in an introduction immediately alienated the people who were not used to hearing "Coonabarabran" in a story. The story had to become the important part, not the location. [Bell 1996, 1]

Journalists had to concentrate on stories with a wider appeal, or slant them that way. It had to be accepted that something that happened in, say, the township of Narromine near Dubbo, was not necessarily of interest to people in the south-western town of Tumut, but WIN argued that it could be if it was approached in a certain way. That was possible with some issues, for example, a story about a road scheme being halted by bureaucracy could be written in such a way that it was targeted more widely at "farming communities being disadvantaged". The problem was that not all stories could be written like that. This was particularly the case with sport, where regional viewers wanted to see their home team and it was difficult not to identify specific towns.

There was also a high degree of competition between different towns for sport coverage; under the dual bulletin system WIN would sometimes be criticised for showing too much Orange sport at the expense of Dubbo and vice versa. Now even more areas were vying for attention.

WIN attempted to get around it by putting together stories of common interest from both ends of the viewing area. For example, Monday night was a big rugby league night, mixing together highlights from the Riverina and central west competitions. If an Australian Rules story was covered - a code very much stronger in the south west than in the central west - results from the central west competition would be included at the end of the story. According to Bell:

It was difficult at times with the individual journalists involved, getting them to step back and to see a bigger picture, and that the last-minute try, giant-killing win, "17-year-old in debut wins match", should be the thrust of the story - as it should anyway. But often in regional broadcasting, it's a crutch to use a local name and it actually is a very easy way of getting into a story.

It never really felt comfortable, I have to say. We had to grin and bear it, and it only ever really worked mid-week, when we got rid of all the weekend games. [Bell 1996, 2]

Then, attention would turn to feature-style stories about, for example, country athletes striving for bigger and better things. The introduction would say "a 17-year-old athletics champion. . ." where in the past it would have said "Binnaway's champion athlete. . ." The location instead would appear on the super, and perhaps in the second or third paragraph. Bell said that in some ways, it was almost like doing a story for a metropolitan market, where specific locations were less important than the general appeal of the story:

It was a hybrid, and at times it worked, and in fact people remarked to me "gee that was interesting to see that", and other times there was a great deal of uneasiness that we were putting stories to air that were good stories, but they did not travel. [Bell 1996, 3]

Sometimes the WIN team felt that they succeeded in their efforts to produce a bulletin which had both local and broad appeal. They also surprised themselves in the number of

stories they produced which did appear to appeal across the geographical area, in particular, agri-business stories. But there were other occasions when the venture was less successful. "There were times when you were ten seconds into the bulletin and you sat there thinking 'this is not working', and you could almost hear the thud of television sets being turned over," said Bell.

A positive side to the regional bulletin was that it cut down on the number of "filler" stories which had to be found for the previous half-hour local bulletins. Bell believed the strength of the regional bulletin was in its second break where the aim was to present feature stories based on people and good pictures, not the cheque presentations and school plays which usually made up the centre segment of lengthier local bulletins. But again there was the difficulty of re-training staff to steer away from the more traditional style of local television news:

You had to get your mind around it, and frankly at times the intellectual ability of some of the people working on the bulletin didn't really get the idea. I was never 100 per cent happy with what we did, however, I feel that it was better than nothing. [Bell 1996, 3]

He added that the staff's struggle to come to terms with the style of the regional bulletin may have been a reflection of what the audience was feeling. Even so, there was very little audience feedback. The figures - which still placed the WIN bulletin a distant second behind Prime - did not change much. There was a slight drop initially, but on other occasions, such as after cricket tests, the bulletin inherited a large audience.

Further rationalisations were in store. With the News Director away on extended sick leave, more and more responsibility was given to the Chief of Staff based in Orange, including decisions about the story line-up first thing in the morning, compilation of the rundown, writing of headlines and playoffs, and newsbreaks. A journalist from Wollongong was assigned to the western bulletin late in the afternoon to compile the scripts and produce the program as it went to air, and a tape editor was retained to take the feeds of stories from the Wagga and Orange offices. The bulletin was, to all intents

and purposes, put together in Orange, transferred to Wollongong, and broadcast back out to the western viewing area.

In October 1995, the decision was made to dismantle the western news edit suite in Wollongong, and transfer the equipment to one of the Victorian newsrooms. The tape editor previously assigned to western news was absorbed back into the Wollongong newsroom and all feeds relating to the western bulletin accommodated through the Wollongong newsroom's edit suites and existing equipment in the videotape department. Complete responsibility for the bulletin had been transferred to the Orange Chief of Staff, a journalist who, although experienced as a reporter, had never been in the studio while the program went to air. The actual production of the program, after all edited stories had been transferred to Wollongong by the Chief of Staff, rested in the hands of a junior journalist borrowed from the Wollongong newsroom.

The bulletin continued to rely on generic rural issues, with a smaller emphasis on stories relating to specific areas and towns. The particular problems associated with sport coverage and weather, where it was impossible not to name towns, continued to trouble WIN management. Eventually the decision was taken to introduce windows, allowing separate sport and weather segments to be shown in the south west and central west markets.

On the following page is an example of WIN's regional western bulletin (see Appendix 3, video tape):

**3. Regional bulletin
8 December 1995**

| | |
|---|--|
| Headlines: Fatal accident, Land clearance, Australian made | |
| 1. Fatal accident | |
| 2. Accident READ | |
| 3. Various accidents | |
| 4. Land clearing | |
| 5. Australian made | |
| Commercial Break | |
| 6. Jack Munday in Wagga | |
| 7. Lucknow history | |
| 8. Police cell preservation | |
| 9. Christmas trees | |
| Commercial Break | |
| 10. Cricket | |
| 11. Fijian cricket | |
| 12. Mudgee racing READ | |
| 13. Race tips | |
| Commercial Break | |
| 14. Weather/market report | |
| 15. Week's events | |

This bulletin was noticeably more generic than the two local half-hour bulletins analysed earlier. In the headlines, there was no mention of the location of any of the stories where previously this would have been emphasised to highlight the localism of the bulletin. The first item, relating to the fatal car crash, contained no reference to the location of the accident in its introduction, although the fact that it was near West Wyalong, roughly in between the former central and south west viewing areas, would have qualified it to run in both of the previous local half-hour bulletins.

The next videotape item was about an accident in Orange, presumably of little interest to viewers further south, but with a Wagga-based accident edited onto the end of the story to attempt to hold south west viewers' interest. The land clearing story was perhaps an ideal item for the regional target market. While the story was based in the Dubbo area, the issues involved might have been of sufficient interest to rural viewers generally.

Similarly the following item about Australian-made products, although based in Wagga, may have been generic enough to strike a chord with viewers throughout the combined region (note the reference to “country businesses”). In the past a story like this would have been shown in both local bulletins, with a different introduction written for each market to suit its audience.

The item relating to “green” leader Jack Munday’s visit to Wagga was typical of many events covered by a regional journalist; a visiting politician or dignitary with no real local relevance except that they happened to be in town. Because this story had no definite relationship with the Wagga area it would be considered appropriate for showing in the regional bulletin.

The introduction to the item about the history of Lucknow was written in such a way that it would appeal to history enthusiasts anywhere, not necessarily only those who lived in the immediate vicinity. Again, this was a change from previous efforts, where the localism of the item would be emphasised. Likewise, the story about the restored cell at Dubbo gaol could have been considered colourful enough to hold wider appeal. The story about Christmas trees mentioned “one country town” in its introduction. While it was actually about an activity in Junee, there was an attempt to make the item relevant to all country viewers.

The sample bulletin highlights the difficulty relating to presenting sport in a regional bulletin. The first sports story, about a cricket match between Riverina and the ACT, was a typical aggregation-style item in that it would have been shown in both Canberra and the west. However there would have been little or no interest in the item from the northern part of the western viewing area. There was an attempt to make the following cricket item of more generic interest, with reference to the “western leg” of the Fijians’ tour, but it was hard to hide the fact that the match took place in Dubbo. In the racing tips, there was coverage of race meetings spanning the viewing area, from Nyngan to Tumut.

The weather report highlighted a major problem of a regional bulletin; covering such a large area while remaining sympathetic to the fact that country viewers required a comprehensive weather coverage. This was a problem with the initial integrated bulletin, and it remained a challenge with the regional bulletin. Coverage extended from the north west slopes and plains to the Riverina and south west slopes, with each region getting only the briefest mention. The market report, introduced during the previous local bulletins at viewer request, had been modified to embrace the regional focus and covered both Coonamble and Griffith on the same night.

In summary, the regional bulletin had an effect of blandness, having neither the “best stories of the day” flavour of the integrated bulletin, nor the thorough local coverage of the two half hour bulletins. While WIN attempted to maintain a local news presence in western New South Wales through a cost-efficient system, the result, in this phase, was a loss of localism and a bulletin which could have originated from any region. The decline in emphasis on production at the Wollongong end was also noticeable in the overall presentation and use of such elements as graphics.

Local windows

The idea of local windows was another turn in the path of the development of WIN's western news, a compromise between the regional bulletin and the half-hour local bulletins. Under this structure, the first two segments of the bulletin would continue to be a mixture of stories from throughout the expanded western viewing area, with emphasis on generic issues rather than those relating to specific towns. Two separate sport segments would be recorded; one for central west, and the other for south west. The same would occur for the weather presentation. Viewers would see the first two generic breaks, and then the sport and weather segments for their viewing area.

Bell believed the introduction of windows within six months of the regional bulletin's development was a concession by management that the regional style was not working:

It showed that really deep down they knew that was the case, but were unable, unwilling to finance the extra bodies that would have enabled you to do windows. [Bell 1996, 3]

The introduction of windows did lead to some expansion in staffing, after the downsizing that occurred with the onset of the regional bulletin. The Wagga newsroom had three journalists and two camera crews, and one editing suite, to produce approximately five news stories and three sport items. Stories continued to be fed to Wollongong, where the Wagga bulletin was recorded first, followed by the separate sport and weather segments for Orange. The sport and weather breaks for each viewing area had to be carefully timed to ensure they were of the same duration.

The daily rundown of stories was compiled by the News Director now located in Orange, and this led to a perception among some Wagga news staff that there was a natural tendency to feature stories from the central west more prominently than those from the south west. However, the ability to again run parochial sport stories was considered a major bonus, and the separation of the weather segments removed the problems posed by weather presentation in the regional bulletin.

There was also a change in newsreaders. After early resistance to having the same person reading both the Orange and Wagga bulletins, the station now opted to use their popular Wollongong news presenter, Mary Franks, to present the pre-recorded western news service, as well as the live Illawarra bulletin at 6pm.

The switch to local windows enabled WIN to capitalise on the fact that Prime had, at that time, moved its local news to 5.30. The earlier news was not popular in the west, and ratings figures began to look much healthier for the WIN service. After the decision was made by Prime to defy Seven and move its local news back to 6pm, the ratings slid back in Prime's favour.

In late September 1996, WIN made the decision to introduce an additional window into its western bulletins, this time separating one news segment. The bulletins would, in

effect have only one break in common; the remainder of the half hour would be separated. There were logistical problems with this and in the end it was considered more desirable to completely separate the two half-hour bulletins, blending in those stories which had to be shared between viewing areas, and enabling introductions to those stories to be rewritten to make them more appropriate to the area in which they were being shown. Both bulletins were pre-recorded, allowing three news services - central west, south west and Illawarra - to be broadcast from one studio in Wollongong.

There was a need for the regional bureaus to move to earlier deadlines, with Wagga feeding stories from around 3.15pm, for a recording at 4.15. Orange's feed was at 3.45pm, with the recording to start at approximately 5pm, allowing enough time for preparations for the live Illawarra bulletin at six o'clock. [East archive, notes October 1996]

To viewers, this may have seemed like a return to the situation where each region had its own local half hour news service on WIN, competing with Prime at six. However, internally, there were some major differences. The first was staffing levels; in the original local bulletins each area had five reporters including a Chief of Staff. One journalist assigned to each area was based in Wollongong, and also acted as production assistant to ensure the highest quality control. There was a full-time News Director based in Wollongong, responsible for overall co-ordination of both bulletins, and a full-time tape editor with a separate editing suite specifically for the western bulletins.

Each area had three camera crews and two editing suites, and in addition, Dubbo shared a camera operator with the production department. News graphics and headlines were compiled in Wollongong, any required feeds of material from Channel 9 were recorded in Wollongong and inserted into the western stories, and Dubbo material was fed to Wollongong for editing, taking considerable strain off the Orange facility. As much as possible, any shared stories were adapted and re-cut to make them relevant to each area in which they were to be shown.

Under the new system staff in each bureau were expected to produce only a slightly decreased amount of material than that required for a full local half-hour, with a greatly reduced staff. In Orange, the News Director, with responsibility for both bulletins, was assisted by two other reporters including one sport reporter, and a journalist in Dubbo. There were two camera operators and one editor, and one editing suite with some additional access to a production suite in down-time. Dubbo stories were fed to Orange and edited there, and the Orange edit suite also generated graphics and headlines.

In Wagga, the three journalists included a sport reporter, and a part-time editor assisted the two camera operators in putting the stories together. As the new structure developed, the most senior journalist at Wagga assumed responsibility for that bulletin so there were, in effect, separate News Directors for each bulletin.

The second change related to earlier deadlines. The Wagga feed of stories had been put back by about an hour and the Orange feed by an hour and a quarter, compared with the feed times of the original local bulletins. This change, combined with reduced access to editing facilities and the requirement to generate graphics and headlines at the local level, placed considerable strain on staff and led to a general lowering of picture and editing quality. The deadline pressure was exacerbated by the fact that crews in the western area had to travel long distances to cover the region adequately; a far more pressing issue in the west than in Canberra or Illawarra.

The combination of reduced staff, earlier deadlines, and transfer of responsibility for both bulletins to Orange, meant an inevitable decline in quality and production standards. For example, in the past, any "flash-frames" or poor edits appearing in a story would be noticed and brought to the attention of the tape editor responsible. Now, production staff in Wollongong openly admitted that flash-frames were seen and simply accepted as being a part of the system; it was considered unreasonable to complain, given the pressure already placed on the bureau staff. [East archive, notes October 1996]

The bulletins were produced by a journalist from the Illawarra newsroom who had already done a full day's work reporting Wollongong stories. He or she had no communication with the western News Director until mid-afternoon, when the process began of printing out the introductions to stories. With the best will in the world, there was little sense of responsibility for the bulletins at the Wollongong end of production, and therefore no striving to achieve presentation excellence.

During the time that the senior journalist at Orange retained responsibility for both bulletins, they were unable to view any stories being fed from Wagga to Wollongong and therefore had no control over quality from that bureau, and given their extremely busy role in Orange it was doubtful they were able to exercise any quality control for Orange or Dubbo stories as well. That problem eased with the senior Wagga journalist assuming more responsibility.

The bulletins continued to feature some generic stories, or stories from the other part of the viewing area with seemingly little relevance. Deadline pressures and lack of local knowledge at the Wollongong end meant that often these stories were not made more local in any way, even through the re-writing of an introduction.

Lack of editing facilities in Wollongong meant that it was very difficult to add additional pictures to stories if the need arose, even if there were someone to supervise it. The result was two bulletins which, in style and content, were somewhere between the dual local bulletins previously presented by WIN, and the combined regional bulletin (see Appendix 3, video tape):

4. Separate recorded bulletins
Wagga bulletin: 28 October 1996

| |
|---|
| Headlines: Gundagai closures, Shop opening, Leeton crash |
| 1. Gundagai closures |
| 2. Shop opens |
| 3. Leeton crash |
| 4. Jugiong body RVO |
| 5. English HSC |
| 6. Playoff |
| Commercial Break |
| 7. Daylight drink drive |
| 8. Crime forum |
| 9. Farnham concert |
| 10. Playoff |
| Commercial Break |
| 11. Matterson Cup Cricket |
| 12. Cricket READ |
| 13. Redbacks softball |
| 14. Hockey position |
| Commercial Break |
| 15. Weather |
| 16. Market report |
| 17. Jewellery lottery |

This bulletin was recorded at approximately 4.15pm, to be replayed as live at 6pm. The opener remained generic, containing nothing specific to the Wagga viewing area. The first story was specific to the south west, being located at Gundagai, but also had wide appeal to the total region with its focus on the closure of services in country areas. This made it an ideal style of story for this format, able to be replayed in both viewing areas with minimal alteration to the introduction. It contained reference to “country New South Wales” to highlight its wider appeal.

The story contained no supers on the interviews. This was evidence of a fall in quality control, as the correct supers were apparently not communicated from Wagga to the Wollongong control room, and no-one in Wollongong, not even the producer of the

bulletin, took the initiative to find out what they should be. The result was a number of anonymous people making rather strong comments.

The second story in this rundown was to have been about the opening of a major shopping mall in Wagga. However, due to the early feed time, the story was not ready to run at number two. Instead, the producer opted to go on to story three, shot by a stringer the day before and compiled by the same journalist who presented story one. Story four was the type of item which brought some relief to an over-stretched newsroom; a reader voice-over, able to be compiled from existing pictures. This style of story required minimum time and effort to put together.

The fifth story was another item which worked well in a regional format; the HSC was common across the viewing area, but could also be made specific to one city by basing the story on a local school. The story contained references to “across the Riverina”. Under the previous regional format, WIN would have run the same HSC story across both the central west and south west viewing areas. Now however, they were able to at least introduce more localism by featuring specific schools in each region.

Story two finally made its appearance after story five, and it was a parochial Wagga story with a reference to “Orange and Dubbo”, making it a potential candidate for viewing in the central west area although on this occasion that did not occur. When the reader introduced the commercial break, there was a wide shot of the Wollongong studio but nothing to indicate to viewers that the news was not being broadcast live from a studio somewhere in Wagga.

Story seven was one of several Orange-produced stories to feature in the Wagga bulletin on this occasion. There was no reference to the location in the introduction, and at the beginning of the story there was mention of “Charles Sturt University”, which had campuses in both viewing areas. While “Bathurst” appeared on the super, there was no other indication of where the story was shot. There was mention of “rural or country

New South Wales”, in another attempt to highlight the wider relevance of the story. Member for Bathurst Mick Clough was referred to simply as “Labor MP”.

Story eight was also produced in Orange, from pictures and voice-over received from the Dubbo bureau. It was another reasonably generic story about regional crime, with no reference to the location in the introduction. Phrases like “country communities” and “all country areas” were used, and mention was made of “Wagga and Dubbo” parliamentarians. The ninth story was another parochial Wagga production and the third compiled by journalist Jane O’Brien, again highlighting a busy schedule for staff given the early feed time.

During the introduction to the commercial break, there was mention of “local sport”, and the break featured a number of local commercials, as well as an advertisement for a property sale near Bathurst. The sport break was very relevant to Wagga, with local teams and home-town locations; one of the main reasons for the introduction of local windows.

After the commercial break with more local advertisements, the weather concentrated on details specific to the south west viewing area. There was reference to the satellite photo which, again, had not yet been received from TCN 9 and was edited in later. The presenter mentioned “our backyard”, referring to a backyard many kilometres away. Features important to farmers, like the dam levels, continued to be included in the weather segment. Following the weather was the nightly market report, produced from Orange and featuring prices from around the combined viewing areas; on this occasion, Forbes, Dubbo and fruit from Flemington. Depending on the location of stock markets on a particular day, there was an attempt to cover the main centres in both areas.

The final story was another item from Orange, this time quite specific to the central west. While there was no local aspect to this story which could be considered relevant to

viewers in Wagga, it was presumed that the content itself would be of sufficient interest to hold their attention.

Orange bulletin: 28 October 1996

| |
|--|
| Headlines: Bus crash, Creek pollution, Golf |
| 1. Church bus crash |
| 2. Armed holdup READ |
| 3. Crime forum |
| 4. Creek pollution |
| 5. Manildra Democrats |
| 6. HSC starts |
| 7. Playoff |
| Commercial Break |
| 8. Daylight drink drive |
| 9. Gundagai closures |
| 10. Orange 150 church |
| 11. Playoff |
| Commercial Break |
| 12. Bathurst race row |
| 13. Golf scramble |
| 14. Orange races |
| 15. Parkes rodeo |
| Commercial Break |
| 16. Weather |
| 17. Market report |
| 18. Jewellery lottery |

The Orange bulletin began with the same generic opener as the Wagga bulletin, but the headlines were different. The first story related to a bus crash in Orange, the type of item which is bread-and-butter local news. Following the bus crash was a live item about an armed holdup in Coonabarabran - an area remote from the location of any news crews or stringers and therefore not an option in terms of getting pictures of such a story.

The regional crime story which featured in the Wagga bulletin followed, this time more prominently - in the first break - and with a re-written introduction to make it more specific to Dubbo. Story four, about creek pollution, was another parochial Orange story and contained a mistake in the super over the journalist's standup. The fifth story was an item produced in the Illawarra newsroom, from a stringer at Nowra. Its only relevance to

the central west came from the connection with the Manildra company, and there was no attempt to re-write the introduction to make it more appealing to a central west audience. The journalist signed off “WIN news, Bomaderry”, an Illawarra location.

Story six was about the HSC - this time the central west version. While the story was based on a school at Dubbo, there was reference to “Western region school students”. Story eight was the same drink driving item shown in Wagga, with no change to the introduction. Story nine, the Gundagai closures story which led the Wagga bulletin, had an introduction change to make it more generic, with reference to “one country town”. It was also moved down the rundown, reflecting its diminished relevance to central west viewers. Story ten was a parochial Orange item which would be difficult to justify showing to the Wagga viewing area. The following commercial break featured local commercials, including a local version of a national BP advertisement.

Like the Wagga sport break, the Orange presentation was full of localism. The first story was another easy-to-compile item, made up of pictures from Channel 7’s coverage of the Bathurst 1000. The remainder of the stories related to local teams and events, with the Parkes rodeo shot by a stringer in that town.

The next commercial break also featured local advertisements, including one for the National Field Days with WIN prominently mentioned as a sponsor, reinforcing its commitment to the local area.

The weather again was presented without the satellite photo and there was another mention of “our backyard”. Coonabarabran was described as “north of the viewing area”. The market report was repeated for the Orange bulletin, and the final item was another run of the winning lottery ticket from Bathurst, this time more relevant to the local audience.

Summary

By 1997, WIN's Western news could have been considered a commercial success. Viewers had access to virtually the same level of local news they experienced when the company decided to venture seriously into the news market in the west in 1993, but at a decreased production cost. Methods of cutting costs had been explored and results achieved. In essence, the news team learned to do more with less and was able to produce a similar product to its competitor, Prime, with fewer staff and resources. Ratings fluctuated, but were considered at a tolerable level with hopes of an increase as Prime also felt the pinch of shrinking resources.

There is no doubt that the establishment of the western news service was a brave economic venture by a company attempting to meet the challenges of aggregation. However, from a journalistic point of view, the changes that took place reflected the down-side of the policy; the need to achieve results on decreasing budgets, a lessening commitment to localism, an increase in generic news, pressure to cut corners, earlier deadlines and pre-recorded bulletins which gave a somewhat superficial version of the day's events, covering only stories which happened before a certain time of day.

While it is true that viewers in the western region had the choice of two local services where previously they had one, both services had in fact suffered in content and quality at the hands of aggregation. At a time when technology, more than ever, was enabling events to be shown to the world when or immediately after they happened, examination of WIN's western news as an example of an aggregated service reveals that local television news had in fact taken a step backwards in terms of immediacy and quality.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

It is clear that the equalisation policy and its implementation via aggregation had a significant impact on all aspects of regional television operations, and the ramifications continued long after the change was made in individual markets. The impact was felt particularly keenly in the area of news.

Equally clearly, there were two sides to the argument about whether aggregation was a successful and desirable policy. On the one hand the regional licensees continued to argue that the change had come at considerable and ongoing cost to their operations. On the other, bureaucrats could counter that regional viewers now had a choice of three commercial stations where previously they had only one service, and furthermore, local advertisers could now afford to pay for commercials on television where previously they could not.

The following conclusions can be drawn relating to the implementation of aggregation:

1. Aggregation satisfied the need for increased viewer choice

This was a fundamental element of policy in the introduction of equalisation. Oswin had noted in his report on localism that lack of choice of programming was the most frequent criticism of the previous monopoly structure. The former Communications Minister, Michael Duffy, had described the lack of viewer choice as “inequitable and discriminatory” [DOC 1985 part 2, 9] and said in his major policy statement of 1986, that by 1990, “nearly all Australians living in regional areas can expect at least one extra service. . . and most will have two.” [DOC 1986, 17] By 1997 aggregation had achieved its original aim in the eastern states of Australia, and work was well underway towards introducing additional stations in other regions.

Even with the financial impositions on competing regional stations, viewer satisfaction dictated there would be no going back on the policy. Not surprisingly, the ABA had not

received any viewer complaints about the fact that there was now a greater choice of free-to-air commercial programs in regional areas. Knowles of the ABA summed up the attitude of government thus:

The largest populated area of Australia has now got all services. We haven't had one complaint about having the additional service. I don't think we could try to take them away now. [Knowles 1996, 4]

The Department of Communications and the Arts found in a 1993 evaluation that equalisation had achieved the government's main objectives of "providing viewers in regional markets in eastern Australia with an equivalent choice of commercial television services as are available to metropolitan viewers. The program was implemented on time and in advance of schedule in two markets." [DOCA 1995 – Internet site]

2. Aggregation diminished the power of monopoly held by regional stations, through the introduction of competition

The issue of competition will continue to attract opposing arguments; that competition through aggregation greatly improved the range of programming choice available to regional viewers and led to better operational decisions on the part of licensees; or that the impact of competition brought many operators to their knees as they struggled to attract advertising income and implement services in new markets, leading to diminished quality of presentation and simply "more of the same" on the two new commercial channels in each area.

Certainly stations could argue that the early years of aggregation brought severe financial constraints. As the ABA pointed out, however, no operators succumbed to the economic pressures and many continued to expand their networks. In November 1997, for example, it was announced that Prime Television had purchased the Channel Nine Network in Argentina for \$215 million, and that the purchase "might be the forerunner to further expansion in South America." [SMH 26/11/97, 35]

The policy did have the effect of eliminating the local monopoly of regional stations. Some, however, including Prime and WIN, went on to establish themselves as major regional networks with substantially more assets and influence than they held in a monopoly situation.

3. Aggregation failed to reduce regional stations' reliance on the metropolitan networks

From the earliest days of television in regional Australia, governments and broadcasting bodies had openly expressed the desirability of regional stations maintaining their independence. Oswin urged that local stations be "controlled, in practice, by people who have some real interest in the areas concerned." [Oswin 1984, 64] During the satellite debate, when the possibility emerged that regional stations could simply become translators for metropolitan programming, the ABT warned that the networks' influence would be greatly increased, with possible "dire consequences for . . . regional stations in particular." [DOTC 1990, 56]

In its report on Television Equalisation, the Senate Select Committee expressed the view that if regional stations aligned themselves with metropolitan networks through aggregation, the regionals might in fact develop more influence than they held as mere customers of the networks. In reality, aggregation meant that each regional operator became almost entirely dependent on one metropolitan network for general program content and scheduling. The need to adhere to network schedules meant that production of local programming was kept to a minimum.

The extent of network domination varied between regionals, ranging from stations within the Ten network which virtually lost any outward sign of independence in programming and identification, to larger regional licensees such as Prime, WIN and NBN which retained individual identification and a limited degree of local programming.

4. Aggregation had a major impact on localism in regional television

Localism in regional television had been seen as the one major benefit of the previous system of monopoly licensees. Submissions to the Oswin report suggested that the benefits of having a single station in a region greatly outweighed the perceived disadvantages of viewers missing out on multiple television services. The Forward Development Unit said in its report that under equalisation, localism in regional television might even increase. The Senate Select Committee said viewer demand would probably determine the extent of localism to be retained.

The Committee proved correct on the fate of localism under aggregation. Supporters of local television in its traditional form might bemoan the loss of local content, but as already documented, stations under aggregation tended to give viewers as little local content as they could get away with. Network scheduling, lack of resources, and the growth of a number of regional networks all took their toll on local content, as did the speed with which stations had to move into new, unfamiliar viewing areas. According to Bell:

I don't believe those companies really got into [the local flavour of an area] because they couldn't. They had to hit the ground running. It was naive. It was highly naive. [Bell 1996, 7]

Apart from a total increase in local advertising, spread over three stations, it was almost impossible to refute that localism decreased under aggregation. However, there continued to be differing opinions on whether or not this was of great detriment to regional communities.

5. Aggregation changed the way journalism was practised in regional television and had a major effect on regional television newsrooms

Specifically in relation to news, the arguments for and against the benefits of aggregation become more fragmented depending on individual experience. Station administrators and government policy-makers held a different view to those journalists who had lived through the implementation process but had since left the industry. There were also some

differences among practising senior regional television journalists, many of whom were reluctant to openly criticise the policy and, indirectly, their employers.

Clearly, however, the effects on the practice of journalism in regional television newsrooms were substantial, through the change and uncertainty created by the establishment and subsequent withdrawal of new services, the particular issues introduced through the establishment of competitive news environments, the effect of reduced operating budgets, the responsibilities of network affiliation and the shifting priorities in relation to localism.

The resulting increase of pressure on regional journalists to perform with fewer resources, the reduction in training and staff development opportunities and the tendency towards generic rather than locally-specific stories meant that the lot of the regional television journalist became more difficult. The ensuing exodus of long-serving experienced staff ensured that, after an initial flurry spurred by the competitive era, general reporting and presentation standards were doomed to fall. For these reasons, there is an overwhelming case to suggest that the impact of aggregation on regional journalism was substantially negative.

The fact that aggregation led to the growth and subsequent demise or reduction in a number of news services across various viewing areas, as documented earlier, led to a climate of uncertainty for journalists and other news staff working in regional television. Stations used news as a commodity to attract audiences in new markets, but underestimated the resources needed to efficiently run a regional television news service and failed to recognise that news-gathering required a specific, unique set of skills and circumstances, quite unlike general program or commercial production.

Such experimentation proved costly for those whose livelihood was used as short-term bait in the new competitive environment of aggregation. It also proved costly for what had generally been a healthy employment environment for both new and experienced

journalists. Begg used the experience of journalists in Canberra to support his view that it was simply not necessary to build three commercial television stations in the national capital. The total number of journalists working in television in Canberra by 1996 was well below the number working in television news at one station prior to aggregation:

It's now down below 100, and I think that if you looked around you'd probably be hard pressed to find 200 people working in the local television industry in Canberra today. So it hasn't meant greater journalistic opportunity and that's sad. It no longer has the potential to be such a wonderful training ground. [Begg 1996, 5]

Bell agreed that stations should have investigated alternative ways of presenting news which might have had a chance of attracting new audiences, instead of simply duplicating the successful local news formula of the incumbent station. However, such a decision would have interfered with the strict scheduling necessary to fit in with affiliate programs:

The people making the decisions wanted a sure thing, and the only sure thing they knew in 1989, when they set up aggregation, was that the news is at six o'clock. No-one ever thought of any other way of doing it, of putting the local news before or after. . . At one point in Wollongong we had three stations in a city of 250,000 people chasing after each other. It was pure madness and it would always be madness. [Bell 1996, 5]

One suggestion for helping stations maintain the quality of their news service while at the same time conserving precious resources was for competing stations to consolidate their news services into one. The same bulletin would be shown on both stations, but the service would have the benefit of pooled resources across both channels.

While having considerable economic merit, it would be hard to imagine such a scenario in a competitive environment like Wollongong or Newcastle where stations made much of their own local news. In addition, it would be likely that station management would not allow a pooled news service to operate with, say, four camera crews (two from each station), knowing that in the past their service had managed to operate with only three. Further rationalisation would be likely, and the consolidated service would end up with similar resources to a service operated by one aggregated station.

There was evidence that the need to conserve resources resulted in a drop in overall quality of news services across all media, not only television. Bell used the Wollongong market as an example in saying that competition for the advertising dollar had an effect across the board, affecting newspaper and radio news quality as much as television, with organisations having to hire less experienced news staff on lower wages and skimp on equipment. Prior to the implementation of aggregation, he described commercial radio in Wollongong as “vibrant”, with two competing commercial services, each with a fully-staffed newsroom, and a respected ABC regional station with adequate resources. There were three primary conduits of news for the Illawarra audience, namely radio 2WL, WIN Television, and the *Illawarra Mercury*:

[Aggregation] has not only affected television, it has hideously affected radio. . . The radio stations have lost nearly a dozen journalists. The ABC is almost gone without trace. [Bell 1996, 5]

Wollongong’s two commercial radio stations did cut back on their news bulletins and staff numbers in the early 1990s, introducing a morning-only news service, and there is some documentation of the economic effects on the radio industry generally. According to the BTCE: “Wollongong’s total radio revenue peaked in 1984-85 and has been in a continuous decline ever since.” [1990, 23] While unable to pinpoint the introduction of aggregation as the primary cause of the decline, the Bureau said discussions with licensees yielded reports of significantly lower prices for television advertising following aggregation:

According to some metropolitan advertising agencies and some national radio advertising representatives, advertising rates for both radio and television in Approved Market C were “highly negotiable”. . . Radio licensees indicated that competition for local advertising intensified following aggregation. [1990, 9-10]

However, figures from the ABA in 1997 painted a more positive picture for commercial radio in regional areas:

In 1995-96, the 129 commercial radio services in regional markets increased revenue by five per cent to \$190.1 million. [ABA media release, 25/2/97]

Cullen of the *Illawarra Mercury* spoke of the demise of radio news in the Illawarra specifically, arguing that radio advertising was “virtually giveaway.” However, he denied there had been any cutting of advertising rates within his newspaper as a result of aggregation, nor had staffing levels or standards fallen in any way. He conceded that there must have been some sort of impact on the print media, but pointed to the fact that the *Mercury*’s circulation did not fall with the introduction of additional television news services in Wollongong, and that the paper’s Saturday circulation had in fact increased:

People aren’t giving the *Mercury* away and saying “we get it all on television”. There are people who are quite happy to watch the television news and say “that’s good enough for me”, but of course in the paper they get all sorts of things. . . that they don’t get on television so there’s always that bonus to buy it. [Cullen 1997, 3]

It could be argued that aggregation did have some positive aspects in terms of regional television news through the diversity of services in some areas, improvements in quality due to competition in some cases, and the opportunity for younger journalists to move through the ranks, albeit at the expense of experienced newsroom staff.

Even with the rapid expansion and demise of services, particularly in the early days of aggregation in each approved market, there was a school of thought that maintained that the quality of local news increased under aggregation because the harsh economic realities tended to weed out inferior or unnecessary services. Knowles supported that view, saying that there was only a certain amount of parochial news to go around, and, after a period of experimentation, stations came to accept that it was not necessary to provide a local news service in every viewing area:

I think there was always recognition that there would be a transitional period where everybody had to work out how the business should run. And I know from talking to a number of the operators that they said they thought they knew how to run regional television, but they learned an awful lot, and they had to experiment and try things out. [Knowles 1996, 3]

In the final analysis, it is difficult for those opponents of aggregation to strike a sympathetic chord in the wider community, because, even if the public was not better off, they remained unaware of that fact. To viewers, aggregation brought the choice of

three commercial television stations to country areas, just as the government had promised it would. If that meant some rearrangement or disruption to news services, even the closure of long-standing incumbent services, it was perceived as a small price for the audience to pay. Only those who worked in regional television in the days of monopoly and experienced the transformation under aggregation would truly appreciate the differences the policy brought. As Bell expressed it:

I'm almost preaching the "this is what's good for you" approach to journalism. Some things you have to have, like medicine, and if you don't have them you're worse off, and you don't know that until you don't have it any more. [Bell 1996, 8]

Looking to the future, if the American experience was anything to go by, regional stations in Australia would have to maintain a strong local element to guard against them simply being translators for the metropolitan networks. According to Andren, the advent of multimedia news meant that, more than ever, regional stations had to get more local to survive:

I think they've got to revisit their local markets and look for specific material that appeals to their regional and rural audiences, because even their city newscasts are so metropolitan-based and parochial. [Andren 1996, 4]

Some predictions were more pessimistic, looking at the possibilities of the networks assuming even greater control. Begg forecast a continuing decline in standards for regional television as the major networks increasingly "called the shots":

In terms of localism, in terms of local content, in terms of actually representing your town, I think that's a rather depressing picture. [Begg 1996, 6]

Bell went further, forecasting that regional television as it had been known in Australia would not exist in five years time, with stations concentrating on state-based presentations with windows for minor presentations of local news:

The idea of a half-hour country news service for an audience of perhaps only seventy thousand is gone. I think we're seeing the last knockings of it. [Bell 1996, 9]

That prediction might prove to be as unfounded as the initial claim that one regional operator in each aggregated market would not survive the implementation of the equalisation policy. However, it cannot be refuted that the policy changed, for better or worse, the very nature of regional television in Australia and the methods and practices employed by those who chose the industry as a career.

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Note: These archives were compiled by Neryl East while working in the regional television industry from 1984 to 1994, and through close association with others in the industry from 1994 to 1997. They include daily running logs and notes taken during the course of the implementation of equalisation. These archives are currently held by Neryl East.

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Andrew Bell, formerly Western News Director, WIN Television, 22 August 1996

Michael O'Grady, former production manager Northern Rivers TV, 1 September 1996

Peter Andren, Federal Member for Calare, formerly Prime News Editor, Orange, 16 September 1996

Ken Begg, formerly News Director Capital Canberra and Prime Canberra , 16 September 1996

Jim Sullivan, News Director, NBN Newcastle, 29 October 1996

Peter Cullen, Editor, *Illawarra Mercury*, 10 April 1997

Interviews sought and declined from Federation of Australian Commercial Television Stations; the Media Alliance; Channel 9 Gold Coast.

Additional information supplied by:

Jeremy Lasek, WIN Orange, formerly WIN Canberra

Rex Clark, formerly Ten Townsville

John Stock, Ten Townsville

Alastair Frew, WIN Rockhampton

Danny O'Brien, WIN Victoria

Ian Gleeson, Sunshine Television Maroochydore

Leith Mulligan, formerly Vic TV Shepparton

Neil McLean, Prime Gold Coast

Robin Barlow, Prime Tamworth

and numerous other news staff in aggregated newsrooms in five states. Some journalists currently working in the industry asked that their anonymity be protected in the writing of this thesis.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: NEWS SERVICES UNDER AGGREGATION

The figures on pages 270-288 represent, in time-line form, the development of news services in the viewing areas of each Approved Market under aggregation (refer to Chapter 3).

APPENDIX 2: SURVEY OF NEWS EDITORS/CHIEFS-OF-STAFF

This is a copy of the survey conducted by the candidate and distributed to all News Editors and Chiefs-of-Staff in aggregated regional viewing areas in May 1996 (refer to Chapters 3 and 4).

APPENDIX 3: VIDEO TAPE

This tape contains samples of bulletins during each phase of the development of WIN Television's news service in western New South Wales (refer to Chapter 5).

Figure 1

Approved Market C

Wollongong viewing area:

| | | | | | | | | | |
|---------|----------------------------------|---------------------|---|----|----|----|--------------------------------------|--------|-----|
| | 89 | 90 | 91 | 92 | 93 | 94 | 95 | 96 | 97 |
| Prime | 1/2 hr local 6pm | 15-minute 5.45pm | 1/2 hr local 6pm | | | | | 5.30pm | 6pm |
| WIN* | 1/2 hr local 6pm | | | | | | | | |
| Capital | 1 hr integrated 6pm (windows) | AXED | some local content in bulletin ex Canberra | | | | Bulletin changed to Sydney news, 5pm | | |

* incumbent

Figure 2

Approved Market C

Canberra viewing area:

| | | | | | | | | | |
|-----------|------------------------|---------------------|----|----|--------------------------|---------------------|--------------------|------------------|-----|
| | 89 | 90 | 91 | 92 | 93 | 94 | 95 | 96 | 97 |
| Prime | 1/2 hr local 6pm | 5 minute updates | | | 1 hour integrated 6pm | 1/2 hr local 6pm | 1/2 hr int. 6pm | 1/2 hr 5.30pm | 6pm |
| WIN | 1/2 hr local 6pm | | | | | | | | |
| Capital * | 1 hr integrated 6pm | | | | 5pm | 6pm | | | |

*incumbent

Figure 3

Approved Market C

Wagga viewing area:

| | | | | | | | | | |
|---------|---------------------|----|----|----|----|----|----|--------|-----|
| Prime * | 89 | 90 | 91 | 92 | 93 | 94 | 95 | 96 | 97 |
| | 1/2 hr local 6pm | | | | | | | 5.30pm | 6pm |

| | | | | | |
|-----|-----------------------|---------------------|--------------------|----------------|---------------------|
| WIN | 1/2 hr reg/int 6pm | 1/2 hr local 6pm | 1/2 hr reg. 6pm | Windows 6pm | 1/2 hr local 6pm |
|-----|-----------------------|---------------------|--------------------|----------------|---------------------|

Capital

*incumbent

Approved Market C

Orange viewing area:

| | | | | | | | | |
|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| 89 | 90 | 91 | 92 | 93 | 94 | 95 | 96 | 97 |
|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|

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|---------|---------------------|------------|--|--|--|--|--|--|
| Prime * | 1/2 hr local 6pm | 5.30pm 6pm | | | | | | |
|---------|---------------------|------------|--|--|--|--|--|--|

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|-----|-----------------------|---------------------|--------------------|----------------|---------------------|--|--|--|
| WIN | 1/2 hr reg/int 6pm | 1/2 hr local 6pm | 1/2 hr reg. 6pm | Windows 6pm | 1/2 hr local 6pm | | | |
|-----|-----------------------|---------------------|--------------------|----------------|---------------------|--|--|--|

Capital

*incumbent

Figure 5

Approved Market A

Townsville viewing area:

| | | | | | | | | |
|---------------------------|-----------------------|----|----|----|--|------|----|----|
| | 90 | 91 | 92 | 93 | 94 | 95 | 96 | 97 |
| Seven (Sunshine) | ½ hr local 6pm | | | | | AXED | | |
| WIN | | | | | ½ hr local (recorded, from Rockhampton) 6pm | | | |
| Ten * ½ hr (QTV) local | 1hr integrated 5pm | | | | | | | |
| *incumbent | | | | | | | | |

Figure 6

Approved Market A

Cairns viewing area:

| | | | | | | | |
|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| 90 | 91 | 92 | 93 | 94 | 95 | 96 | 97 |
|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|

Seven
(Sunshine)

½ hr local
6pm

AXED

Bureau servicing
Seven Brisbane

WIN

Half hour local
(recorded, from Rockhampton) 6pm

Ten * ½ hr
(QTV) local
(windows)

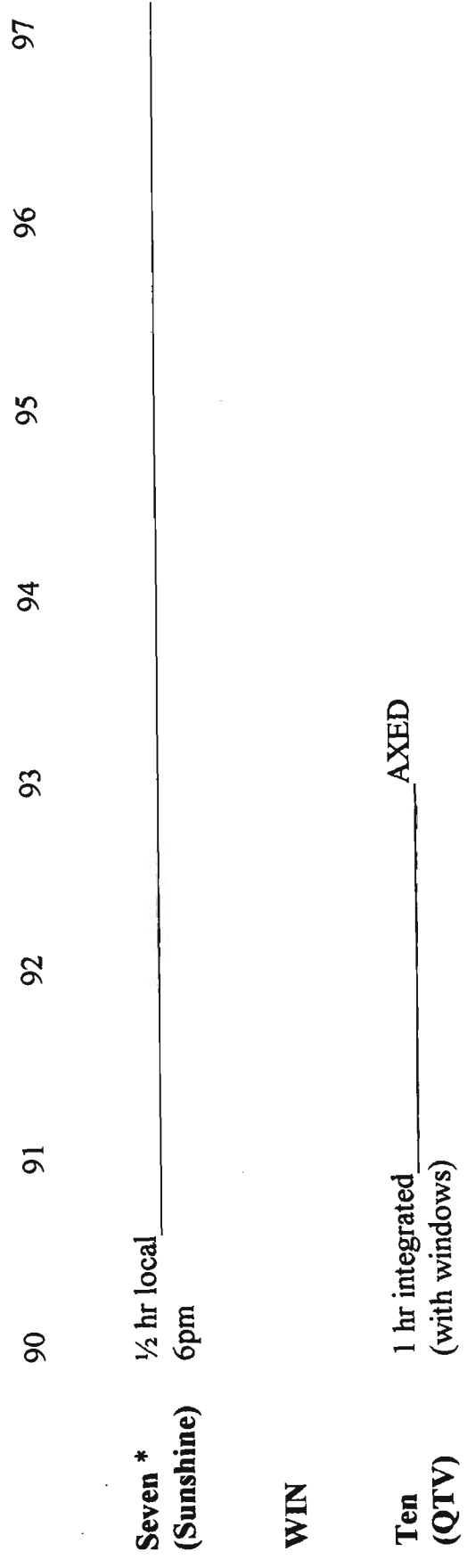
1 hr integrated
5pm

*incumbent

Figure 7

Approved Market A

Mackay viewing area:



*incumbent

Figure 8

Approved Market A

Rockhampton viewing area:

90 91 92 93 94 95 96 97

Seven
(Sunshine)

WIN * ½ hr local, 6pm

Ten 1 hr integrated AXED
(QTV) (with windows)

*incumbent

Figure 9

Approved Market A

Maryborough viewing area:

| | | | | | | | | |
|------------|--------------|----|----|----|---------------------------|----|----|----|
| | 90 | 91 | 92 | 93 | 94 | 95 | 96 | 97 |
| Seven * | 1/2 hr local | | | | 1/2 hr Sunshine Coast 6pm | | | |
| (Sunshine) | 6pm | | | | 1/2 hr Wide Bay 6pm | | | |

WIN

Ten 1 hr integrated AXED
(QTV) (with windows)

*incumbent

Figure 10

Approved Market A

Toowoomba viewing area:

| | | | | | | | | |
|---------------------|-------|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| | 90 | 91 | 92 | 93 | 94 | 95 | 96 | 97 |
| Seven (Sunshine) | | | | | | | | |
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Figure 11

Approved Market B

Newcastle viewing area:

| | | | | | | | |
|---------------|---|---------------------|----|----|------|--------|-----|
| | 91 | 92 | 93 | 94 | 95 | 96 | 97 |
| Prime | 5-min update 6.25 | 1/2 hr local 6pm | | | | 5.30pm | 6pm |
| NBN * | 1 hr integrated 6pm | | | | | | |
| Ten (NRTV) | 1 hr integrated (from Coffs Harbour) | | | | AXED | | |

*incumbent

Figure 12

Approved Market B

North Coast viewing area:

| | | | | | | | |
|----------------|---|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| | 91 | 92 | 93 | 94 | 95 | 96 | 97 |
| Prime | Windows in _____ ½ hr nth coastal news 6pm _____ 5.30 _____ 6pm _____ Tamworth bulletin 6pm _____ recorded, from Tamworth ½ hr Gold Coast news 6pm _____ 5.30 _____ 6pm _____ | | | | | | |
| NBN | 1 hr integrated _____ QTQ news 5.30 _____ 6pm (windows) | | | | | | |
| Ten (NRTV)* | 1 hr integrated _____ AXED (regional) | | | | | | |

*incumbent

Approved Market B

Tamworth viewing area:

| | | | | | | | |
|------------|------------------------|----|----|----|----|----|--------|
| | 91 | 92 | 93 | 94 | 95 | 96 | 97 |
| Prime * | $\frac{1}{2}$ hr local | | | | | | 6pm |
| NBN | 1 hr integrated | | | | | | 5.30pm |
| | 6pm (windows) | | | | | | 6pm |
| Ten (NRTV) | 1 hr integrated | | | | | | AXED |
| | (from Coffs Harbour) | | | | | | |

*incumbent

Figure 15

Approved Market D

Bendigo viewing area:

| | | | | | | | |
|------------------|----------------------------------|--|------------------|-----------|----|----|----|
| | 91 | 92 | 93 | 94 | 95 | 96 | 97 |
| Southern Cross * | 1/2 hr local 6pm | 1 hr integrated | AXED | | | | |
| WIN (VIC) | 1/2 hr local (from Ballarat) 6pm | 1/2 hr combined Ballarat/Bendigo Traralgon 6pm | 5.30pm statewide | 6pm local | | | |
| Prime | 30 second updates | | AXED | | | | |

*incumbent

Approved Market D

Shepparton viewing area:

| | | | | | | | |
|----------------|-------------------|-----------------|-----------|-----|------|----|----|
| | 91 | 92 | 93 | 94 | 95 | 96 | 97 |
| Southern Cross | | | | | | | |
| WIN * | 1/2 hr local | 1/2 hr combined | 5.30pm | 6pm | | | |
| (VIC) | 6pm | Shep/Albury | statewide | | | | |
| Prime | 30 second updates | | | | AXED | | |

*incumbent

Approved Market D

Albury viewing area:

| | | | | | | |
|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| 91 | 92 | 93 | 94 | 95 | 96 | 97 |
|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|

Southern
Cross

| | | | | |
|--------------|--|--|---------------------|-------------------------------|
| WIN (VIC) | $\frac{1}{2}$ hr local (recorded, from Shepparton) 6pm | $\frac{1}{2}$ hr combined Alb/Shep 6pm | 5.30pm statewide | $\frac{1}{2}$ hr local 6pm |
|--------------|--|--|---------------------|-------------------------------|

| | | | |
|---------|-------------------------------|--------|-----|
| Prime * | $\frac{1}{2}$ hr local 6pm | 5.30pm | 6pm |
|---------|-------------------------------|--------|-----|

*incumbent

Approved Market D

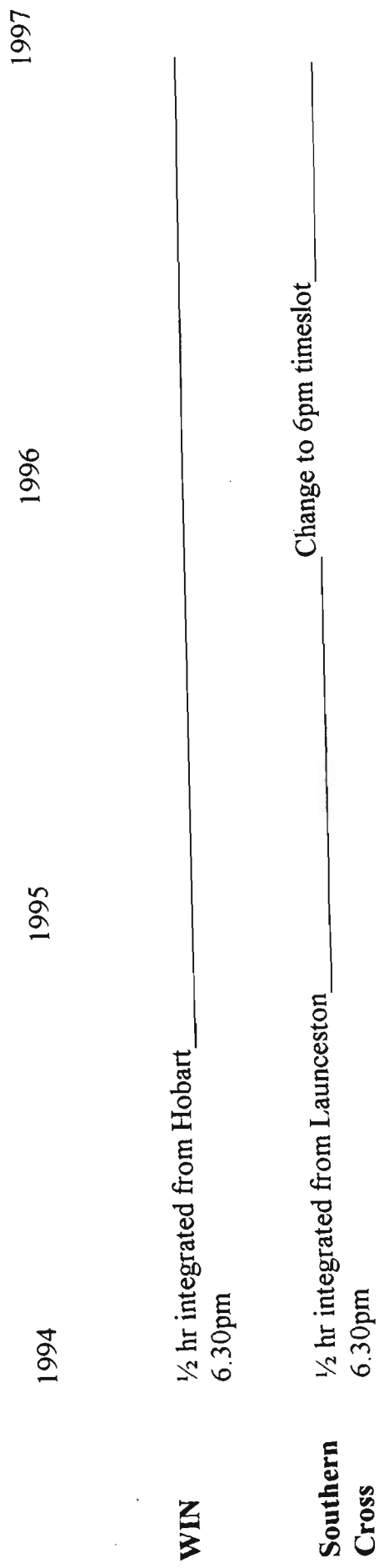
Gippsland viewing area:

| | | | | | | | |
|-------------------------|----------------------------------|--|------------------|-----------|----|----|------|
| | 91 | 92 | 93 | 94 | 95 | 96 | 97 |
| Southern Cross * | 1/2 hr local 6pm | 1 hour integrated AXED | | | | | |
| WIN (Vic) | 1/2 hr local (from Ballarat) 6pm | 1/2 hr combined Ballarat/Bendigo Traralgon 6pm | 5.30pm statewide | 6pm local | | | |
| Prime | 30 second updates | | | | | | AXED |

*incumbent

Figure 19

Tasmania



Survey of News Editors/Chiefs-of-Staff in aggregated regional viewing areas, May 1996

1. What type of news service do you currently provide to your viewing area?
(please tick appropriate answer)

- ☐ Half hour of local news
- ☐ Local "windows"
- ☐ Integrated bulletin with National News
- ☐ No local news

Other, please specify
.....

2. If you provide a news service, how does it differ from the service you provided at the start of aggregation in your region? Please list any major changes which have occurred during that time, and, if possible, the year in which the changes occurred, eg. *1989; half hour local news. 1991; integrated news. 1993; change back to half hour local news etc.* **If you are from an incumbent station, please also indicate the level of news you provided just prior to aggregation.**

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3. If you provide a news service, how many news staff does your station employ?
(please write number in space provided)

- Journalists.....
- Camera operators.....
- Tape editors.....
- Presenters.....
- Other, please specify.....

4. Is this number higher or lower than the number of news staff your station employed at the start of aggregation in your region? (please tick appropriate answer)

- ☐ higher
- ☐ lower
- ☐ about the same

In the following section of this survey, I would greatly appreciate your professional opinion on aspects of aggregation relating to local news. Please be assured that anonymity will be preserved. If this information is used in my research, it will be in the general context of "a survey of news editors/chiefs-of-staff in all aggregated areas of Australia". No individuals or regions will be mentioned.

5. In your opinion, are viewers in your region generally now receiving a better or poorer quality of local television news across all available stations, compared with the service they received before aggregation?

- ☐ better (go to question 6)
- ☐ poorer (go to question 7)
- ☐ about the same (go to question 8)

6. If you answered "better" to question 5, which specific areas of the television news services in your region do you consider to be better? (please tick as many as you wish)

- ☐ choice of local news services
- ☐ more local news stories
- ☐ more local sport stories
- ☐ more local weather
- ☐ higher standard due to competition between services
- ☐ more resources
- ☐ access to wider coverage through a regional network
- ☐ better relationship with capital city network, ability to swap vision etc

Other, please specify;.....

.....

7. If you answered "poorer" to question 5, which specific areas of the television news services in your region do you consider to be poorer? (please tick as many as you wish)

- ☐ choice of local news services is unchanged by aggregation
- ☐ fewer local news stories
- ☐ fewer local sport stories
- ☐ less local weather
- ☐ lower standard due to competition between services
- ☐ fewer resources
- ☐ access to wider coverage through a regional network does not bring any advantage
- ☐ better relationship with capital city network, ability to swap vision etc does not bring any advantage

Other, please specify;.....

.....

8. Do you think competition among local television news services is a positive or negative feature of aggregation?

- ☐ positive
- ☐ negative
- ☐ neither

9. Ideally, how many local television news services do you think your region should have?

- ☐ one
- ☐ two
- ☐ three
- Other, please
specify.....

10. Is your ideal number more or less than the number of local television news services which currently exist in your region?

- ☐ more
- ☐ less
- ☐ same

11. Please feel free to make any other comments about aggregation.

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Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. Please return it to Neryl East, PO Box 215 Figtree 2525 or fax to (046) 28 1493