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1998

## Aggregation and regional television

Neryl East  
*University of Wollongong*

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# Aggregation and regional television

Neryl East

*University of Wollongong*

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# **AGGREGATION AND REGIONAL TELEVISION**

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

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

from

**UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG**

by

**NERYL EAST, MA**

Graduate School of Journalism  
1998

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

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

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

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

## **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**