

Local news on regional TV

Following the ABA's inquiry into the adequacy of news services on regional television there have been two developments: commercial broadcasters in the aggregated markets along the eastern seaboard have taken steps to comply with the new licence condition requiring local news or information; and the ABA has released a follow up report dealing with the non-aggregated markets. **Helen Wilson** collects some observations from the field.



The first report of the ABA inquiry – *Adequacy of local news and information programs on commercial television services in Regional Queensland, Northern NSW, Southern NSW and Regional Victoria (Aggregated Markets A, B, C and D)* – was released in August 2002, and the second report – *Adequacy of local news and information programs on commercial television broadcasting services in regional and rural Australia (solus operator and two operator markets)* – was published (web only) in June 2004. It investigates the issues for most of the country other than the capital cities and the 'aggregated markets' (AMs) along the east coast.

Following the first report the ABA introduced a licence condition applying from February 2004, requiring each broadcaster in the relatively-well populated AMs to broadcast material of local significance to reach a minimum number of 90 points per week. This was

to be calculated on the basis that local news acquires two points per minute and other local information or news or information 'that relates directly to a licensee's licence area' acquires one point. This condition applies in all 'local areas', a term coined by the ABA in recognition of the effective loss of localism since the policy of aggregation (the joining of three service areas into one licence area) was introduced in the early 1990s, and particularly with the closure in 2001 of newsrooms in cities such as Canberra, Newcastle, Darwin and Townsville.

The local areas in almost all cases are a reversion to the service areas of the original sole operator regional markets that existed prior to aggregation. These markets had for the most part maintained their identity under aggregation as windows for advertising and to a decreasing degree for local news, although this was against the original intent of the policy to create larger

markets and hence economies of scale. The ABA inquiry recognised the shortcomings of aggregation in this regard and put in place a measure to strengthen localism in the face of the industry's tendency to reduce it.

There developed regional networks operating nationally (WIN, Southern Cross Ten and Prime) and linked in affiliation arrangements with the city-based metro networks (Nine, Ten and Seven respectively) for program supply. The major exceptions to this pattern are NBN replacing WIN as Nine affiliate in Northern NSW and the Seven Network extending its Brisbane service as a Regional Queensland licensee. These regional networks gradually merged with the operators of other regional and remote operators, and further services were added in the underserved areas, often on the basis of supplementary licences. This network structure has effectively

overridden the AMs as different categories of licence are included in their broadcast areas and complex systems of 'windows' with the capacity for local breakouts have developed. With the imperative to convert to highly expensive digital transmission this decade, centralised networks became even more likely.

Though there has been comparable restructuring among the metropolitan licensees with the rise of national networks, the metro networks continue to provide state-specific signature news programs. In contrast only WIN, of the three regional networks, has maintained a comprehensive system of local news services. Local news available in regional areas outside the AMs has been particularly lacking and the ABA realised in its inquiry that the AMs were a much easier issue to address. However it had set out to investigate all non-metropolitan services so the second report completes its findings by investigating the non-aggregated markets. Most viewers of these services do not receive news produced specifically for their area (it may come from another locality, from a neighbouring AM or from a metro network), though they are more likely to see local advertising.

The second report surveys all regional and remote services, which have fewer television services and owners than the AMs, and classifies them into:

- Solus operator markets: two services run by one licensee (Broken Hill, Griffith, Mount Gambier, Riverland, Spencer Gulf)
- Two operator non-remote markets: two or three services run by two licensees (Mildura, Darwin, Tasmania)
- Two operator remote services: two satellite services (Remote Central and Eastern, Western Australia (WA))

Where there are only two services, one is likely to be a combination of programs from two metro networks. The ABA concludes that there is not the population or economic bases for local services in any of these non-aggregated markets, so it would not be practical to impose a local content requirement. However it particularly encourages operators in Darwin, Remote Central and Eastern, WA and Mildura to introduce some local service, and prefigures a further investigation in 2006.

Whereas the AMs all have populations of about a million, the non-aggregated

markets are all under half this size (in many cases vastly under) and most cover much wider areas. Broken Hill's licence area contains only about 20,000 viewers, for example, while the WA market covers the entire state outside Perth. They are all solus (one operator) or two operator markets, and include areas with populations too small to be aggregated and the original RCTS (Remote Commercial Television Services) satellite licensees, now operating only in WA and central Australia. Prime's WA service is split into only two windows for the purposes of advertising, which still cover vast regions (the south / south west and the rest of the state) and cannot be construed as local services. WIN's WA service is not split. For the ABA to apply the concept of 'local area' to such expanses is problematic, though it floats the possibility of creating local areas in WA based on Prime's split.

Tasmania is the most similar to an aggregated market, with a population of around 440,000 in a restricted area with two major centres. In fact it was aggregated in the early 1990s, but on a smaller scale than elsewhere, with only two markets joined (Hobart and Launceston). A third digital service began in 2003 as a joint venture between the other two operators, WIN and Southern Cross, and providing Ten programming from Melbourne. The report suggests that Tasmania might in future be divided into two local areas for the purposes of the local content requirement.

Returning to the mainland aggregated markets, the regional networks have maintained the news services existing at the time of the ABA's inquiry and/or instigated changes in response to the new licence condition. *Communications Update* requested updates on these changes from university colleagues located in the AMs.

Rockhampton – Regional Queensland

Prior to the new ABA licence provision Southern Cross Ten, one of the networks which had begun closing down its regional news services in Queensland, responded with the introduction in late 2003 of increased local programming which includes: regional news updates in 30–90 second segments, a weekly community notice board (both in prime time and late night) plus a half-hour weekend current affairs program. One potential complication associated with Ten's new weekend programming is that,

while it is compiled locally, it is broadcast from Canberra where Southern Cross has centralised its operations. Local place names may become unpronounceable.

Southern Cross Ten has avoided trying to duplicate WIN's hard news, which the latter continues to broadcast daily Monday to Friday at 6.00pm, as it did prior to the ABA inquiry. The common Queensland response involves introducing community information programs rather than news proper. In addition to Ten's new segment, WIN has maintained a TV community notice board, which it runs for 30 seconds daily at 11.15am and 5.30pm. It now supplements this for two afternoons a week with a *Bush TV* segment during commercial breaks, comprising brief indigenous and community notices of 30–60 seconds.

In contrast to Southern Cross Ten, the Seven Network does not appear to have significantly increased its local content. In the absence of *Seven Days*, the local segment it broadcast weekly for 90 seconds prior to the ABA inquiry, the only local program produced since the new ABA content provision is a 30 second morning community notice board.

The responses of the networks have been variable and largely determined by existing regional competition and schedules. In so far as there is a general trend, it appears to involve the provision of small regular segments for local information, rather than more news as such. Although these information notices do not attract the same weighting as news formats (2 points per minute compared to only 1 per minute for community notices), they may go some way to placating local viewers and meeting the new requirements in the case of Ten, though not necessarily for Seven. Their introduction is unlikely to trigger head-to-head competition in regional markets or challenge the reputation enjoyed by WIN as the most regular news supplier.

Denis Cryle and Christina Hunt
Central Queensland University

Lismore – Northern NSW

Before the ABA inquiry Southern Cross Ten provided no news to its Northern NSW aggregated market. It now broadcasts four 1½–3 minute news updates Monday to Friday for each of the local areas (Richmond/Tweed, Northern Rivers/Mid North Coast, Newcastle/Hunter and North West Slopes & Plains). The updates air at approximately 1.00pm, 4.00pm, 8.30pm

and 10.15pm and are compiled in Coffs Harbour by two journalists, using some information supplied under a confidential content deal by two APN News & Media newspapers, Lismore's *Northern Star* and the Tweed *Daily News*, according to Warren Elliott, Manager, Southern Cross Broadcasting/Channel Ten, Lismore.

Produced at Ten's Canberra production centre, the updates are visionless news reads with animated weather details. *State Focus*, Ten's chat-style Saturday midday current affairs show, is also produced in Canberra and includes 3–5 interviews, or reads, plus stills/graphics. Coffs Harbour also produces *Community Connect*, 2½ minute long information segments for each area which run five times over four days, Saturday–Tuesday.

As all its news and information content is visionless, Ten does not need to retain local news crews, unlike Prime (affiliated with the Seven network) and NBN (affiliated with Nine). NBN is the major northern AM regional news provider. It maintains two full-time news crews in Lismore and Coffs Harbour, one each in the Tweed, Port Macquarie and Taree, and three crews on both the Central Coast and in Tamworth. Nine's QTQ Brisbane Network also runs a full newsroom on the Gold Coast with three crews and produces a full half-hour local bulletin.

NBN maintains the level of regional news production it delivered before the ABA inquiry. It produces regional windows for five areas (Far North Coast, Mid North Coast, Newcastle, Tamworth/Inland and Central Coast), which are recorded from 4.30pm onwards at NBN's Newcastle centre for 6.00pm replay. Each licence area provides stories for two 7½ minute local windows Monday to Friday and two 2–3 minute windows on weekend nights, which are integrated with material from Nine Sydney to produce composite regional bulletins. In addition Nine Sydney's current affairs and infotainment programs take footage and stories from regional NSW crews on an occasional basis. NBN also produces the weekday half-hour *Today Extra* local information show at 11.00am and also two 2 minute morning community notice board segments, Tuesdays and Thursdays, for three broad coverage areas: Hunter, North West and North Coast.

Prime competes with NBN news Monday to Friday by broadcasting separate Inland and North Coast half-hour evening news bulletins, produced from Prime's Tamworth centre. It also maintains a

news crew in each of the following towns: Lismore, Coffs Harbour, Port Macquarie and Taree. Prime, which closed its Newcastle newsroom in 2001, has since re-employed one journalist in that area. It now broadcasts seven daily 30 second to 3 minute news updates into the Newcastle market between 7.00am and 10.30pm. Each weekday at 11.00am Prime also broadcasts *Infonet*, a 90 second community information segment versioned for each licence area (Tamworth/Taree, Port Macquarie/Coffs Harbour, Lismore/Gold Coast, Newcastle).

In the Northern NSW market then NBN and Prime continue to compete for the weekday regional news audience, although NBN clearly provides more extensive coverage. Prime has made an effort to upgrade its Newcastle licence area coverage. Southern Cross Ten is delivering significantly more news and local information than before the ABA inquiry, although it is of low production value and relies to some extent on existing news sources, raising questions about its effective contribution to competition and diversity.

Fiona Martin
Southern Cross University

Wollongong – Southern NSW

Following the closure of Prime's news program in 2001, the only local television news in Wollongong was the well established 6.00pm half-hour on WIN TV, the regional network headquartered in this city. WIN maintains its status as the only real local commercial TV news in Wollongong, with many updates throughout the day and a late night replay at 11.30pm. The situation in the other main centres of the Southern NSW aggregated market is more complex. Canberra, which recently lost two commercial news services amidst controversy, now has a local ACT news service provided by the ABC. In Orange Prime is the incumbent operator and maintains a 'full, traditional news service' in the words of Mike Whiteman, Wollongong Manager. Since the new requirement came into effect there are now, as in the other AMs, brief local bulletins scattered throughout the schedule of all the networks in all local areas, although generally only Monday to Friday.

In Wollongong Prime telecasts seven news and weather bulletins daily Monday to Friday at 7.00am, midday, 2.00pm, 4.00pm, 5.00pm, 7.30pm, and 10.30pm, while Southern Cross Ten have 3 minute bulletins at 1.00pm and 4.00pm and 90

second bulletins at 7.30pm and 8.30pm. A spot check reveals that both are likely to concentrate on the same brief stories. There is also a small amount of regionally oriented programming: the rural program *On the Land* runs for one hour on Sundays at 1.30pm, with material sent from each newsroom. There is also a country music program evolving from the Tamworth Country Music Festival.

Both Prime and Southern Cross Ten have addressed the ABA's challenge by centralising their Australian operations in Canberra, a process now completed by Prime. The programs are all produced in Canberra but Prime have a local journalist on-station in Wollongong who does the 'hunting, gathering and writing' according to Whiteman. The bulletins are then emailed to Canberra and read to camera from there by a single newsreader, who presents herself as 'theirs' to each of the 17 windows separately addressed and recorded.

Southern Cross Ten, which formerly produced no news in most markets, now has two journalists in each AM, based in Townsville, Coffs Harbour, Canberra and Bendigo. They gather press releases, browse the local press and radio, and use local contacts throughout the AM area. From Canberra 17 different news signals are broadcast to 22 windows throughout the eastern seaboard on weekdays, soon to be expanded to 35, including Darwin, Central Australia, Tasmania and Spencer Gulf in SA. Southern Cross Ten also produces a weekly current affairs program for each of their aggregated markets, *State Focus*. The local news and current affairs commitment has meant a major investment in the new facility, with production facilities, presenters and interviewers in Canberra. Eric Pascoe, General Manager NSW, reports that, whilst most of the investment has been in Canberra, 'there has also been some investment in most areas to bolster our facilities for news and current affairs including at our Wollongong office.'

Pascoe also notes that his network is gathering 10% of its points (the maximum allowable) from its various local Community Service Announcements, specifically from its 17 versions of *Community Connect*, a two minute 'What's on in your town' segment compiled by email by an administration officer in each submarket. It is broadcast at random times five times between Saturday and Tuesday. He reports positive feedback from local churches and non-profit organisations.

Prime say that audience response is only anecdotal but has been quite positive. Whiteman reports a conversation with the Wollongong Lord Mayor who 'without prompting offered to feed some "exclusives" to us, as he would with the other outlets!'. Pascoe also claims positive feedback, noting that some bulletins are sponsored, either within a window, an AM or across the entire network, and this is a welcome arrangement for some advertisers. He notes that large advertisers who have a regional orientation, such as Country Energy and Telstra CountryWide may take advantage of such possibilities for being perceived as local.

Helen Wilson
CLC

Gippsland – Regional Victoria

According to an Australian Broadcasting Authority news release on 7 September 2004, regional television licensees in Victoria have exceeded their local content quotas under the licence condition. The results are below:

most regular local news supplier in the Latrobe Valley and provided four 30 second updates between midday and 3.00pm, eight 30 second updates between 3.00pm and 6.00pm. WIN has daily, regional news from all over Victoria at 6.00–6.30pm featuring stories from the Latrobe Valley and the Gippsland region. Although WIN has centralised its offices in Ballarat, Latrobe Valley and Gippsland based stories are compiled locally from the WIN branch in Traralgon. This is then followed by further updates at 7.30pm and 8.30pm with a weather update at 9.30pm and WIN Local News Late Edition weeknights at 11.30pm.

Overall the response to the ABA quota has been met. However ABC Sale journalist, Mike Harris, argues that 'there should be discussion of quantity versus quality, the content of the "commercial break" news updates, and the value of "floating" news updates at variable times on Ten and Prime'. Furthermore it appears that in depth segments for local news and information about the Gippsland region

regional networks. In contrast to NBN the other regional licensee operating in one AM only, the Seven Network, does not appear to be devoting significant resources to supplying local news in regional Queensland.

Although they continue to provide news programs in markets that survived the earlier closures (Prime in Northern NSW and Orange and Southern Cross Ten in Albury), Southern Cross Ten and Prime in most markets now run a new, efficient and centralised operation from Canberra. In a technologically complex but journalistically simple operation in response to the new licence condition, most material is gathered from press releases or other media and relayed to Canberra in text form. A single presenter records each bulletin for the multiple windows the network operates, providing local content only in a highly constructed sense.

While technically fulfilling the licence condition and giving the services a decidedly more local feel, in keeping with much of their advertising, these developments are providing little in terms of original material and nothing in terms of images. Their archives will be worthless. One wonders how the services would cope with emergencies or major news stories, especially if they occur at weekends. One could however imagine such a streamlined system being extended to cover the non-aggregated markets when required. It will be interesting to see how the ABA assesses this compliance in relation to the objective of providing 'diverse and innovative local and licence area material' it articulated in introducing the licence condition (ABA, 'Local material on regional TV', News Release, 8 April 2003, NR22/2003).

Helen Wilson
Adjunct Research Fellow

Thanks to Warren Elliott, Eric Pascoe, Mike Whiteman and Mike Harris for information and assistance.

REGIONAL VICTORIA

Average weekly points over 18 week period 1/2/04–5/6/04

Local areas	Prime	WIN	Southern Cross
Gippsland	130	238	124
North Central Victoria	130	228	124
South West Victoria	131	243	123
Upper Murray & Goulburn Valley	244	341	123

Source: ABA News Release, 'Regional television exceeds local content quotas', 7 September 2004, NR106/2004

Southern Cross Ten and Prime have abided by the quota, providing hourly 3 minute local news (Gippsland content) updates including weather updates. However both channels still have neither local regional prime time nor late night news bulletins. (Prime in Albury broadcasts a local news at 5.30pm weeknights.) Local content does include programs produced by each network aimed at regional viewers. WIN produces programs such as *Destinations*, *Good Sports*, *Fishing Australia* and *Surf TV*. Community billboards also count towards local content, and all networks provide some form of this service. Southern Cross Ten closed down its regional news service in the Latrobe Valley in the early 1990s after the introduction of aggregation. It scored a lower 124 ABA points.

WIN scored the highest in the Gippsland area with 238 ABA points. WIN is the

are still provided only by local print media, particularly *The Latrobe Valley Express* or broadcast on ABC Local Radio in Sale, local community radio, Gippsland FM or the commercial Gippsland stations like ACE Radio's 3GV / 3TR FM or Regional Media's (Macquarie Bank) 3GG / SEA FM (formerly RG Capital Radio).

Andrea Baker
Monash University, Gippsland Campus

Conclusion

Overall then there is a clear pattern of WIN and NBN scoring much higher on the ABA's scale and continuing to provide a full news service. Both maintain relatively high numbers of specialist staff in each local area centre, and some autonomy in the service provided. Unlike the other operators, WIN and NBN are not commonly owned and WIN is yet to centralise on the model of the other two