

Craig Wilson

29th March, 2010.

The Manager
Regional Radio Review
Radio Broadcasting Section
Department of Broadband, Communications
And the Digital Age
GPO Box 2154
Canberra ACT 2601

Dear Sir or Madam,

I read with interest your inquiry into local content offered by commercial broadcasters in Australia and would like to add my comments.

I was very fortunate to work in the radio industry for over 20 years, gaining my first radio job at the age of 16 in 1985.

The 1980's were in my view the end of the "live and local" programming provided to country communities.

In the 1980's, radio stations I worked at were staffed. In fact, the vast majority of radio stations around Australia were live, fully staffed and returned something to their individual marketplaces.

In the vast majority of country marketplaces, there was just one AM radio station, which was fully staffed. For example, in 1988 at 3CS Colac there were 7 on air announcers and a staff of 16. Today, 3CS and its sister station Mixxx FM employ just one part time announcer each and less than five staff.

Another example. In 1985, 3SR in Shepparton had 8 full time announcers. Today the combined 3SR and Sun FM, I'm told, have just 4 announcers between them.

In places like Scottsdale and Queenstown in Tasmania, the local radio stations 7SD, 7XS, and their FM equivalents have no on air staff and no studios. They relay generic programming 24 hours a day, seven days a week, but not one bit of it is produced at a local level!

The company which owns the four radio licences has established a "hub" in Launceston, with programming for eight commercial radio stations on the north and west coast.

The owners of that company basically just suck money out of the two marketplaces with virtually nothing going back in.

How can that be allowed? It shows little commitment to the audience or the towns those radio stations claim to represent.

In the 1980's there was much talk about aggregation in country markets. Aggregation was going to put competition into country marketplaces, with new licences sold to new operators offering the local audience new listening opportunities and extra employment.

Aggregation, however, turned out to be a flop, with most operators simply buying out the competition, creating a duopoly. So much for competition!

That lack of competition means that radio licence holders need to do just the bare minimum, employ the bare minimum of people and write up huge profits with little commitment to the marketplaces they purport to represent.

Successive Governments have allowed the introduction of more and more radio services, yet there is little to show for it in the way of quality programming or locally based on air staff.

The whole idea of aggregation in the commercial radio sector in country Australia was competition. New licences were initially granted to new operators in places like Geelong, Ballarat and Shepparton, however licencing laws quickly allowed operators to own two radio station in the one market, therefore allowing the competition to be bought out.

Once competition went, there was no-longer a need to provide anything other than the bare minimum programming. And that remains the case to the current day.

The problem is this.

The government – the chief regulator of the industry - has allowed radio stations to shirk their responsibility to provide local news from a local person, local programming, local sport, and local events.

Two separately owned radio stations in the same market compete, they provide new and innovative programming, they go live to air, they try to beat each other on who is the best and most committed radio station to the market.

A radio licence is a privilege, not just a reason to make money. Because licences are so scarce, the trustee of that licence has an obligation to make the most of the licence and provide the best possible local programming to the communities the licence covers. Sure, people also have to make a buck along the way, but they do have a responsibility to also provide good services to their communities. I feel that under the lax laws that currently exist, in most cases this is not happening.

In my view there needs to be a commitment from commercial radio licence holders to provide a minimum of 8 hours a day of local programming, and at least 4 local news bulletins a day Monday to Friday.

That still gives radio station operations the scope to make a decent profit, but it also returns a degree of local content and local presence to local radio stations which have basically just become relay transmitters over recent years.

After all, the owners of these radio stations have an obligation to give something back for the profits they receive, or have they just been given a licence to print money?

These days I own 3 country newspapers and operate them in the way I believe radio should be run – in profit but also with a responsibility to deliver a minimum standard of programming.

I wish your inquiry every success.

Yours sincerely,



Craig Wilson.
Ballarat Vic.