

Centralisation in regional radio: Networking and localism in the Super Radio Network

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Harry Criticos has worked in radio as an announcer and voice-over artist for over twenty years. While he was mainly employed as an announcer, he has held various positions within a radio station from journalist to promotions manager. He is currently a PhD candidate at the University of Newcastle and became interested in this research project after working for the FM Network hub for the Super Radio Network (SRN). Having worked in regional radio, he was curious to know what effect, if any, the growth of a network such as the SRN may have on regional stations.

Abstract

This paper provides a brief discussion of localism and networking in the radio broadcasting industry; in particular, it focuses on the Super Radio Network (SRN), the largest radio network in New South Wales. Through interviews with management and the observation of announcers and journalists who broadcast both locally and throughout the SRN, the paper looks at the place regional stations hold in a networking situation and how localism on regional radio seems more important to the regulators than to the radio industry. One aspect of deregulation of the radio industry, which was carried out through the Broadcast Services Act 1992, was the ability of licensees to increase the number of radio licences they could hold from a maximum of seven to an uncapped amount nationally, with a limit of two stations per licence area. The consequence of this was an increase in networked hours, ownership concentration, lack of diversity and, importantly, the loss of local voices and local content in regional areas. While networking is not new to the radio industry, the way it occurs post-deregulation is very different. Prior to deregulation, licensees in regional areas generally operated from 0500am to midnight with the majority of programs hosted locally. Regional radio had local announcers, who discussed local events and issues. Post-deregulation, and in the case of the SRN, stations broadcast 24 hours per day, with the majority of programs hosted outside the local area with an average of 6 hours of locally hosted programs, Monday to Friday. This situation occurs in most licence areas. Preliminary research indicates that there is a divergent view on the issues of "local" and "networking" between management and on-air personnel.

Introduction

This paper reports on the first stage of a research project on the Super Radio Network (SRN). The SRN is an example of how a company has taken advantage of a deregulated radio industry and has a monopoly in many of the licence areas that it operates in. It is evident that as the network is expanding there is also an increase in the number of networked program hours. However, while there is an argument by the industry that networking is providing a service to the licence area that may not otherwise exist, data collected from interviews and observations at a regional SRN networking hub indicate that the quality of this service may be an issue. What is also evident through interviews and the literature is that the economic rationale on which deregulation was based, and enacted through the *Broadcast Services Act 1992* (BSA), seems more an ideal that does not function as expected. The research also shows that the attitude to networking and localism differs greatly between announcers on the FM and AM stations. This paper

investigates the case study of SRN as an example of a network that is operating at the bare minimum of the legislated requirements and highlights the struggle between the regulators, the radio industry and program-makers in regard to networking, local content and localism.

The Super Radio Network

The SRN consist of 38 radio stations—two digital and 36 analogue stations, comprising 22 AM and 14 FM radio stations—making it the second largest radio network in Australia and the largest in New South Wales (NSW). With the exception of 2SM and the digital stations in Sydney, the stations are spread across Northern New South Wales and South-East Queensland. The FM stations have a music-based format, while the AM stations are talk-based. A number of SRN stations take program from a feeder station from 9:00am until 5:30am the following day. There is no one central feeder station in the SRN. 2SM Sydney and two regional stations share the responsibility of supplying program content to the regional stations.

Deregulation: an overview

Studies into the regulation of Australian radio have centred mainly on the *Broadcast Services Act 1992*, itself an amendment to the 1942 act (Ames, 2005, p. 2). The Act was changed in 1987 and again in 1992 for radio broadcasting, reflecting the changing economic philosophy of the Hawke and Keating Labor Governments, which regarded deregulation as a panacea for the nation's well-being (National Museum of Australia, 2008). The Broadcast Services Act introduced major changes to the way radio would function in Australia, and in some senses these changes brought it into line with radio regulations of other countries. Changes were made to local content, foreign investment and ownership limits and were designed to introduce cross-media ownership provisions effectively deregulating the radio industry (Collingwood, 1999, p. 12). Collingwood (1999, p. 20) has argued that since 1992:

Management decisions on cutting costs have had a profound impact on Australia's commercial radio sector: networking is now an established feature of the media landscape, and many local-level jobs have disappeared. With them has probably gone at least some of the capacity of regional radio stations to present local voices and to be involved in local affairs. Local news quality, and other local-level production capacity, remain unknowns.

The Federation of Australian Radio Broadcasters (FARB) (now Commercial Radio Australia), the body that represents and lobbies for the industry, in its submission to an inquiry into regional radio in 2001 (Productivity Commission of Australia, 2001) did not, at the time, see any issues with deregulation. It regarded the 1992 Act as a way to "improve efficiency and facilitate expansion" (Federation of Australian Radio Broadcasters, 2000, p. 10), compared with the interventionist style enacted by regulatory authorities through the *Broadcast Services Act 1942*. Hendy (2000, p. 43) puts the industry's position by suggesting that, as far as radio proprietors and the industry bodies such as Commercial Radio Australia (CRA) are concerned, deregulation has not gone far enough and that the "micro-management" by government (regulating content) should be relinquished so a radio station can meet the demands of its audience.

Despite these desires by the radio industry, Braman (2007, p. 275) points out that media concentration through deregulation has "reduced the number of points at which pressure needs to be put by those who might be interested in shaping content". Rather

than competition delivering diversity, there has been a concentration of ownership despite an increase in the number of licenses issued between 1992 and 2004 (Ames, 2005; Fairchild, 1999; Marcato, 2005).

Methodology

The stations in regional New South Wales where the research took place are not only hubs but also took networked program—that is program material broadcast from a hub (or feeder station) to all stations in the SRN. Due to the nature of the amount of networking that takes place in the SRN, the interviews and observations took place during the breakfast program at each of the AM and FM stations, as that is the only locally hosted program at the majority of SRN regional stations. It was felt that this would provide a valid comparison between the stations. The journalists were observed between 4:30am and 11:00am and announcers between 4:30am and 9am. Following the observation, interviews were conducted. The only exception was that the afternoon (FM) and drive (AM) announcers were observed and interviewed during their respective programs, as these were not only networked to other regional stations but were also broadcast to their local area. Two journalists (one AM and one FM) and five announcers (three FM and two AM) participated in the research.

As a research strategy, a case study of radio and networking provides the researcher with a flexibility of design within a short timeframe (Yin, 1989, p. 21) while allowing the researcher an attempt to detach themselves from the study to avoid a perceived contamination of the case (Hsia, 1988, p.295). Case studies are also considered unobtrusive, allowing the researcher in this case to study a radio station in a real-life setting using credible sources of evidence (Hsia, 1988). This evidence can be accumulated from a number of methods such as interviews, surveys and observation.

Observation, according to Neyland (2007, p. 99), is a way for ethnographers to “orient their research” and to maintain a fresh approach to the organisation and what is being observed (Neyland, 2007, p. 101). Interviewing allows participants to offer detailed information and assist the ethnographer to better understand what was observed (Neyland, 2007, p. 112). Also, as managers are difficult to observe, interviews allow the ethnographer to clearly see their role (Neyland, 2007, p.112). Harper (as cited in Neyland, 2007, p. 28) suggests that ethnographers must have a purpose to the interviews and observations carried out in the field. In the case of this research it was very specific.

I undertook a series of interviews and observations of announcers, journalists and managers (including program directors) at a regional SRN station that acts as a hub/program feeder for the AM and FM SRN stations. The aim of the observation and interviews was to understand how the program-makers collected and used information and how much of that content was “local” information. Program-makers, as Dunn states, have “developed narrative conventions to enable listeners to “see for themselves”, to understand the context, to make sense of space and time and relationships within them” (2009, p. 1163). Managers were interviewed to understand the role of a hub/feeder station and how they viewed those stations that were receiving their networked program.

I approached each participant to explain why I was doing the research. Requests to be involved with the research were well accepted, with all interested in the study more than willing to be involved. While some of the questions were structured, many

questions arose from the observation. By utilising both structured and less-structured questions this ethnographer, for example, was able to compare similar tasks or thoughts of announcers and journalists as well as to further explore the activities of each participant in their role at the radio station.

The development of networking

The structure of the radio industry prior to deregulation in 1992, according to Armstrong (as cited in Moran, 1992), provided a degree of diversity, since “in radio, control of the licences is more widespread, and the programs do not originate at any national or central source” (p. 102). Armstrong added that radio stations during this period were “programmed separately and independently”, with networking (apart from news) a thing of the past since the introduction of television in 1956 (as cited in Moran, 1992, p. 102). It was television that caused the radio industry to specialise and become a local medium for a local audience (Chambers, 2003, p. 35). That is not to say that networking was non-existent at this time either, as Armstrong infers; it was not as evident compared with the extent that it occurs today.

While much has been written about the recent rise in the number of networked stations, radio networks, as hinted at above, are not a recent phenomenon. One of the first to be established was the Macquarie Network in 1938. This was formed by a group of member stations and as such controlled the dominant radio programs of the time—for example, the Lux Radio Theatre (Moran, 1992, p. 30). The formation of a network and pooling of resources made economic sense. This was because stations could access the top programs and the advertising dollars associated with those programs through extending their audience by reaching areas outside the major cities (Ames, 2005). However as Ames (2005, p. 184) states, networking relied on cooperative agreements between station owners which in today’s highly concentrated market is difficult. This is highlighted by the SRN which has no real need for the supply of material from stations outside that licensee’s control. As Drushel (1998) states, the drive to networking is economically motivated rather than being for the purpose of achieving a regulatory objective, as stated earlier by the Federation of Australian Radio Broadcasters:

Radio group owners maximise their economic potential in the market by taking advantage of scale economies, or by spreading fixed costs over a large number of revenue-producing stations. Because the number of radio stations in lucrative markets is fixed, broadcasters must merge or acquire existing stations to grow. (p. 5)

As much of rural Australia has seen a decline in population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006) the networking of regional radio stations on economic grounds is not unrealistic, especially as these areas experience an increase in competition amongst regional media (radio, television and newspapers) to obtain a share of the shrinking regional advertising market. Deregulation has allowed licences to establish networks without penalty and with the express permission of regulators to offer a service to regional areas which would otherwise be, based on FARB’s comments (Productivity Commission of Australia, 2001), non-existent.

This situation is mostly due to the Australian regulator, the Australian Broadcasting Authority (now Australian Communication and Media Authority (ACMA)). Like their US counterpart, the Federal Communication Commission (FCC), the Australian Broadcasting Authority determined that, if diversity, competition and localism were to

be fostered, then deregulation of the industry would allow this to happen. It was, as Prindle (2003, p. 297) states, marketplace theory that drove the decision:

The marketplace approach to broadcast regulation proposes that a marketplace without ownership restrictions serves the public interest by creating a competitive environment. Increased competition promotes diversity and localism in programming as stations seek out specific niche markets to gain the greatest audience share. Thus, the public interest principles of competition, diversity and localism can be achieved through deregulation of ownership restrictions.

However, with the inability of the radio industry and the regulators to define localism, this marketplace approach may impact on the value of regional radio. Regional television, in comparison, has “greater value and impact in terms of publicity and marketing, rather than for any contribution to local knowledge and debate” (Dwyer, Wilding, Wilson, & Curtis, 2006 p.13).

Localism: an industry and regulatory perspective

As the Federation of Australian Radio Broadcasters argued in their final submission to Local Voices: An Inquiry into Regional Radio in 2001, it was not the responsibility of the licensee, nor a requirement of the Broadcast Services Act, to provide regional audiences any level of local content (Federation of Australian Radio Broadcasters, 2001, p. 2). The Federation of Australian Radio Broadcasters (2001, p. 3) argued strongly that localism

doesn't have to be someone in the studio in the town to which the program is being broadcast. It is about what comes out of the speakers from the consumer's perspective—it is material of relevance and appeal to the local audience.

Despite the timeframe, FARB's reasoning is one restated by SRN management in 2009:

What's the difference between someone sitting in a studio in Port Macquarie doing a music shift, playing three hours of music, playing local ads like community service [announcements] . . . that music could come from anywhere. It can be scheduled here [at the hub] as long as there's someone sitting there [Port Macquarie] pressing the button. This is the silly part about the whole ACMA three hour thing. (M2, interviewed October 13, 2009)

These comments by the Federation of Australian Radio Broadcasters and SRN management should cause regulators a degree of concern as to whether marketplace theory, on which they based the deregulation of radio, has provided regional radio license areas with a better, more diverse and local service. Marketplace theory was also supposedly to deliver localism through “listeners who prefer a station that has local programming” (Prindle, 2003, p.298), which could be difficult in regional markets where both the AM and FM licences are held by the one proprietor and have a high degree of networked hours, as is the case with the SRN. The underlying issue here is defining “local”. The Australian Communication and Media Authority has not provided, through the Broadcast Services Act or other instruments, a specific meaning of “local” or “material of local significance”. Rather, the Australian Communication and Media Authority (2007c, p. 2), through the Broadcast Services Act has provided a broad meaning of local:

News bulletins, weather bulletins, community service announcements, and designated local content programs are local if they relate to a licensee's licence area.

The Australian Communication and Media Authority also gave a broad meaning to “local” when it conducted the 2007 Local Content Levels Investigation Report. One of the many purposes of this report was to investigate if there was a need to legislate local

content so as to limit its erosion under a deregulated environment. The Australian Communication and Media Authority took into consideration the minimum number of hours (3) for local programming and a minimum number of minutes (12.5) for local news to maintain a level of localism. Out of this investigation the Australian Communication and Media Authority derived yet another meaning of “local”. Despite protestations by the industry through submissions to this investigation, the Broadcast Services Act was amended to reflect new local content rules for radio stations through “material of local significance”. To maintain a balance between the survival of regional radio and providing a local radio service in regional Australia, the Australian Communication and Media Authority had to be mindful of how it defined “material of local significance”. Its report stated:

A broader definition will make it easier for licensees to comply with the local content requirement but may conflict with the policy objects behind the introduction of the requirement. On the other hand, a narrow definition will result in a requirement that many licences—for example, those that have a predominantly music format—cannot currently meet and would impose significant financial cost to meet in the future. (Australian Communication and Media Authority, 2007c, p. 17)

In their submission to the above investigation, Commercial Radio Australia provided Australian Communication and Media Authority (2007c, p. 71) with their preferred template, recommending that the regulator consider the following in defining “material of local significance”: programs of any kind that are produced locally and broadcast locally (locally hosted programs); programs produced outside the locality but “tailored” for the locality (locally tailored programs); and material containing no local references but which is of particular interest or importance to persons within the locality (locally relevant material).

The amended Broadcast Services Act, enacted in 2008, seems to reflect the desired outcome by Commercial Radio Australia. The BSA amendment states that material broadcast by a licensee is “material of local significance” if it is hosted in, or is produced in, or relates to the licence area of the regional commercial broadcasting licence (Australian Communication and Media Authority, 2007a, p. 2).

With such broad definitions of localism, how can regulators and the industry be expected to develop local regional radio?

What is localism?

That the Australian Communication and Media Authority was involved in two regional radio inquiries in 2001 and 2007 is recognition that localism is an essential element in the media landscape—a situation that must also be recognised by the radio industry. However, some commentators argue that the idea of localism may have been an unfortunate error borne of parochialism on the part of early regulators. Kirkpatrick (2006, p. 88) added that the poor implementation of localism for regional radio was due to either regulators being weak or that localism was unworkable as a concept and a mere folly. To clarify, the Australian Department of Communications in 1984 explained that an underlying belief of localism is that ownership and programming should be controlled at, and cater for, the area in which it broadcasts. As to why this should be the case, the Australian Department of Communications (1984, p. 5) has stated that:

The concept of localism has never been explicitly prescribed, nor fully explained, in any broadcasting legislation or single government policy statement. Notwithstanding its

existence over a long period, the ambiguity and the complex nature of the concept means it cannot be easily or precisely defined.

While there is a degree of conversation occurring around the term localism, there are a variety of meanings offered for localism by a number of authors. For example, Saffran (2008, p. 4) describes it as:

A term encapsulating radio's unique and inherent qualities fostering its ability to serve the public interest in local communities, such as local announcers in local studios talking to local audiences.

On the other hand, DiCola (2006, p. 75) states that localism means:

Serving the interests of a local community as separate and distinct from that community's identity as part of the nation or the world. It pertains to where programming is produced, who produces it, and whether that programming meets local communities' and local residents' needs.

While localism may not be a legislated requirement or policy as such, historically there was a clear intention that the provision of a broadcast licence (radio) was "intended to provide a local or regional service . . ." (Department of Communication, 1984, p. 25). The Hawke Government, in 1984, expressed a clear policy direction on ownership of radio licences. This was based on a number of underlying assumptions such as the belief that a local owner who was also in control of the licence would better meet the needs of their local community. While the state seems reticent to make localism a legislative requirement, possibly to avoid conflict with the radio industry, regulators are more willing to impose local content rules, albeit with compromises that seem to cater to the needs of proprietors rather than regional licence areas.

Networking and localism: the program-makers perspective

From the interviews conducted with SRN announcers, journalists and management, it is evident that each had a different perspective of what it means to be "local" and networking. For example, journalists in the SRN hubs broadcast both local and network news. When asked what local meant to them in terms of news, one journalist said:

Things as I say, that are affecting us here . . . Things that are going to be council stories, the older audience are more going to be concerned about major developments coming along in their area that might impact on their quality of life. Things that hit their hip pocket, Who's looking after the kids? Those sort of emotional triggers. You look for stories that are like that because you're looking to hook the audience and keep them. (J1, interviewed September 8, 2009)

Another stated:

If they [the audience] want local news, people tend to go to [other commercial stations] or ABC local news. So I stick with the national agenda. (J2, interviewed September 8, 2009)

These and other interviews revealed that journalists had a grasp of localism, as did announcers. However, with the latter group there was a difference in the level of importance placed on localism by announcers on music stations and those on a talk-based format. One announcer at a SRN station with a music format said:

I think that's somewhere where we could do better. Most days we try and have maybe one or two local stories but no, we don't have an overly local emphasis on the show. And I think that is an area we could improve in definitely. And it's something that I'm very interested in. I always try and look at the local papers. But look, to be honest with you, sometimes the

national stories are just bigger stories or they're funnier, or they've got more sort of "relatability" for people just listening generally. So, I suppose it's always what's best for the show first and then if it's local great and if not, well, so be it. (A5, interviewed September 9, 2009)

Another announcer on a SRN station with a predominantly talk-based format stated that, to them, local was:

Anything that has an impact on the lifestyle or the economy and everything in-between . . . Anything relevant to this region. So, a local actor in LA is local for me. A fire down the street is obviously very local for me . . . As long as there's some impact on a local community. (A2, interviewed September 24, 2009)

The comments from journalists and announcers confirmed the observations made of their work process and preparation for programs. During the observation period, it was noted that the announcers on an FM station were more likely to source material from the Web, national papers or content broadcast on other radio stations in Sydney. The announcer on one program chose only one local story as a way to generate callers, although during the course of the program, the background of the story was essentially dismissed and turned into a generic talk spot with only a very brief mention of the "local" aspect of the story.

The announcers on the SRN station with the talk format prepared their program in a different manner. While they did source material from national press and the Internet, the on-air content and studio process was very different to the music station. The announcer that was observed concentrated mostly on the local paper, which he was constantly referring to.

To most announcers, journalists and managers being local is not about their personal belief or a station management/owner directive to "be local". It is a commercial and economic derivative where there is the need to find and create an audience that can be traded for advertising revenue. During interviews with management, it was indicated that regional SRN stations, as individual business units, were not obligated to take networked program. If they were deemed to be profitable, then they could broadcast locally with content decided by the management of that station. Radio stations 2DU Dubbo and 2RE Taree (in New South Wales) and 4AK Toowoomba (Queensland) are examples.

It is argued by Bardoel and d'Haenens (2004) that deregulation has left the responsibility of both content and social function up to the commercial broadcasters themselves, with no recourse for the citizen to know how the radio stations live up to their responsibilities, especially as the availability of sources of, and the amount of, information increases.

Much of the research on localism and local radio argues that local media and local issues are important to regional radio audiences who want to be involved with their local station as it is a way for them to contribute to what is happening in their community (Ames, 2007, p. 170; Dwyer, et al., 2006, p. 25). Additionally, research commissioned by the Australian Broadcasting Authority (2003, p. 37) found that local communities were tolerant of networking if it was "relevant and of interest". There was also an understanding that if networking did not exist, these communities would most likely be left without a radio service. However, as noted previously, what is important to the audience is secondary in importance to industry professionals (including proprietors) who give priority to commercial interests.

There is then the question of the ability of a networked station to interact with the local audience, who have their own community identities, when it broadcasts to many regions at the same time, and consider all those active audiences to be a single passive object.

An example of this can be seen with radio 2BH located in Broken Hill in regional New South Wales. Both Fry (1998) and Starkey (2004) argue that towns and cities in regional areas have their own identities and access to this identity can only be garnered from living within the community. As such, access to and use of this local knowledge affects the style of broadcasting and program content and its appeal to that audience.

When 2BH was purchased by the SRN in October 2007 the program schedule was changed to bring 2BH in line with other stations in the network. One of the programs added to the program line-up was “Talkin’ Sport”, which originates from the 2SM hub in Sydney and, at the time of writing, is hosted by three sporting identities—Graeme Hughes, (rugby league), Gavin Robertson (cricket) and Brett Papworth (rugby league). However, Broken Hill is closer to Adelaide in South Australia than it is to Sydney and its main sport is Australian Rules football. According to SRN management, several complaints were received from listeners stating that they did not want to hear about rugby league, and were only interested in “Aussie Rules” especially during the football season. Despite the complaints the show is still broadcast to the 2BH licence area.

While preliminary research indicates that to most on-air staff “localism” is important, networking is far too entrenched. This affects not only an opportunity for them to connect with the audience, it also affects employment opportunities and talent development. SRN Management dismiss localism as an unrealistic and uneconomic ideal and that networking, if it is controlled and balanced, does not disconnect regional stations from their licence area. SRN management see networking as a way for regional stations to achieve a degree of professionalism:

Having Grant [Goldman] doing breakfast in those areas [Port Macquarie, Coffs Harbour and Orange] would be a godsend to some of them because it would be a much better polished show because he is a very experienced announcer than what they could potentially get. (M2, 2009)

While networking was accepted as the direction the industry was taking, on-air personnel interviewed for this research concurred that networking had a negative impact on their industry. As one announcer lamented:

What networking does is potentially impact negatively the future of the industry . . . I reckon that networking has shut down a lot of those jobs like drive in the bush, is a thing of the past, afternoons, nights are all networked, so there’s not a lot of new talent coming through . . . I have no problem with a network talk show, because you still have the right to have a say, but I think the biggest impact is what it does to the talent pool in radio. (A2, 2009)

This announcer added that:

The medium should be around and should be blossoming and I don’t know that it is. I don’t know that we’re uncovering the level of new talent . . . and I wouldn’t like the next radio talent to be a former athlete or former polly [politician]. It should be someone who’s done the hard yards in radio, you know, that’s got the skills. (A2, 2009)

Journalists in general also held a negative view of networking:

I see a few negatives of networking to be honest. I think that local news is actually really important and it really doesn’t give you the opportunity to do that. (J1, 2009)

This journalist added that:

I really don't think that networking is about journalism. It's not a journalistic decision at all. It's got nothing to do with content, it's got nothing to do with quality, it's just about, I think, a cheaper way to get news to a greater number of people. (J1, 2009)

While observing the journalists, there seemed to be a stronger focus on national stories and sport than stories of a local nature. One journalist reasoned during their interview that it was sometimes difficult to get good local stories. However, they did also highlight a major issue with networking: avoiding local stories when broadcasting news to the SRN regional network stations.

We are a local station after all. And so sometimes you feel when you're in that network mode you think "gee that's a good story" but I've just got to be mindful that we're wider today and we've got to walk away from it. (J1, 2009)

Considered an inconvenience by on-air personnel, it is clear that networking defines the structure of the SRN. As such, this had an obvious impact on the professional approach of announcers to their radio program.

Announcers on music-based FM stations on the SRN did not consider their broadcasting to the network as important as their primary role at the hub. Most of the announcers at the hub pre-recorded their network program as most of them have two shows—their main one at the hub station and the other for the network feed. In most cases their hours of broadcast at the hub overlapped with their broadcasting on the network, therefore they had a need to pre-record their show.

It was also observed during this pre-recording that there was minimal effort by the announcer to do more than tell the listener what song they just heard, provide trivia about the artist or what song or contest was coming up next. There were no time calls nor listener interaction, both of which are traditionally important to local audiences. The regional stations, and subsequently the audience, were essentially treated as second-class citizens by the network. In response as to why the regional feed was not important, one announcer said:

I'm marked on the airshift I do [at the hub] and the bit of production that I do actually, obviously contributes to the radio station's revenue and the automation on the regional station's doesn't contribute to our revenue, so that's the reason. (A3, interviewed September 15, 2009)

This minimalist approach to providing quality programming and involvement to the network seems to be fostered by management:

We don't put a lot of resources into the daytime product other than it's a music-based format. So I guess they get information about music stars like Robbie Williams's latest single and information about recording artists and music's pretty much all they get across the day, plus they get a national news service. (M1, interviewed September 9, 2009)

It was also noted during the observations and interviews that there seemed to be a sense of contradiction between what was being said and what was actually happening. While management may be dismissive of localism, SRN stations are, in some licence areas, more local than their competitor, Macquarie Regional RadioWorks. This is in keeping with the SRN submission (No. 171) to the Local Voices inquiry in 2001. Adding to this contradiction was that stations recently acquired by the SRN have added staff, including announcers and journalists, to make the stations appear more local by

maintaining an average of two local shifts per station per market. This situation may be clarified with further research.

Conclusion

Through these observations and interviews, it was emerging that the network hub, as a primary revenue base for the network, was of greater importance to management and some announcers. As the network feed made no revenue contribution, localism and regional stations featured little in the mindset of those whose program was networked to regional areas. It is quite evident that revenue is clearly a driving force behind networking, more so than the management decision stated earlier by the Federation of Australian Radio Broadcasters. Quite overt is story selection and compiling material for a radio program—it had to be of interest to an audience that was being on-sold to advertisers. While “Networking” and “localism” are not new concepts in radio, the evidence above reveals their current form is very different from what occurred prior to 1992: regulation appeared to encourage a higher degree of localism than today. Deregulation, while benefiting large commercial operators, seems to have come at the expense of diversity and localism in regional radio and its identity on the Australian media landscape.

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