

Hello Australia? The Impact of Networking on “Local” Commercial Regional Radio Programming

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Australia’s commercial radio is increasingly networked into regional areas, and this paper examines the nexus of the metropolitan voice meeting regional listeners. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) has managed a national broadcast network for years, and networks for the commercial sector have been integral to the development of Australian radio. However, for Rockhampton, the approach to managing networked commercial broadcasting on the FM band is quite new and increasing in scale. This has been affected by the dynamic ownership environment in which regional radio finds itself. This paper provides an insight into the increasing “lack of diversity” for regional listeners in Queensland as a result of some of these changes, contrary to Australian Broadcasting Authority aims. In doing so, it specifically responds to assertions made by Peter Collingwood about the potential impact of networking on regional Australia made in his paper “Commercial Radio 1999: New Networks, New Technologies”.¹

This paper also raises the question of virtual location – does the need to be “everywhere” affect the character and conversations that take place between presenters and their listeners? Specifically, it looks at two commercial radio stations in Rockhampton, and analyses some of the strategies used by these stations to create a sense of “local” in order to engage regional listeners.

Introduction

Networking has always been part of the commercial radio industry in Australia.² From its inception in the 1920s, commercial radio faced two main challenges: increasing its attractiveness to advertisers, and generating profit through economic efficiency. Regionalism, or reaching out to the masses outside metropolitan areas, was an early strategy for increasing radio audience size, and networks were established not necessarily on the basis of ownership, but of pooling resources in order to attract advertising contracts. Radio’s relationship with government, and early federal government desire to strengthen the regions and provide services and amenities saw early emphasis on regional broadcasting,³ and broadcasters were encouraged to cooperate as it was thought that this would be the only way to improve Australian radio services. The formation of the Macquarie Network in 1938 is an early example of networking, where a number of independent stations formed a loose alliance under a network banner in order to help access more substantial advertising funds.

While networked commercial radio has been part of Australia’s radio landscape almost since its inception, commercial FM radio is a fairly recent introduction into many regional

areas. For example, in the area to be discussed in this paper (Central Queensland), commercial AM stations had been present since the 1930s. Rockhampton was one of the first beneficiaries of a radio service, and 4RK was established in 1926 as a B Class relay station for 4QG which was an A Class state run station.⁴ It was one of the first Australian Broadcasting Commission stations in 1932, and one of only three stations based outside a metropolitan area. 4RO was established as a commercial station in July 1932, and 4CC was part of Regional Broadcasters Australia and was also introduced in the early 1930s. Commercial FM stations, however, were only introduced in 2000 into the region.

Networked programming, which was established as part of the commercial AM landscape, was fundamental to the expansion of commercial FM radio. The ability to network (and resulting profitability) has been reliant on ownership or cooperative agreements between stations, and ownership in the commercial radio environment, both AM and FM, has been dynamic Australia-wide. This is particularly evident since changes were introduced to the 1992 *Broadcasting Services Act* that reduced restrictions on ownership. Radio ownership has arguably always been incredibly competitive; the difference now is that there are fewer owners, fewer cooperative arrangements, and bigger, more streamlined organisations generally. Where commercial AM stations have traditionally relied on networking of their talkback programs (thus the nation-wide success of John Laws), commercial FM stations have relied on their music-oriented programs as fundamental to the concept of “network”. On commercial FM, instead of Laws, we have teams like *The Benchwarmers* (a Gold Coast-based duo comprising of two men called Ken and Dan who hold the drive-time afternoon slot), and *The Fat 30*, an evening music program, beaming into regional areas. However, as will be discussed later, the networking of programs into a regional area such as Central Queensland has been sporadic. In a global media environment where a Channel 7 press release assumes that Jackie O being a co-host of a new television program will attract an audience, the question raised for a regional audience is “Who the heck is Jackie O?”

In 1999, Peter Collingwood raised concerns about changes to the 1992 *Broadcasting Services Act*, particularly in relation to regional radio and the increasing size and potential influence of DMG in his article “Commercial Radio 1999: New Networks, New Technologies” written for the Radio issue of *Media International Australia* in 1999. Collingwood noted the major changes to the 1992 *Broadcasting Services Act* as a result of the deregulation of commercial radio during the Keating period of government, particularly in relation to limits on the number of stations a company could control (there subsequently being no upper limit to the number of stations, and the limit in one area growing from one to two stations). He also discussed the end of regulation of content on radio, which was a change from the policy of localism that had been in place since the 1930s and fostered a two-tiered system which saw the ABC flourish as a national station, and the commercial stations retain a local character. Finally, he noted the removal of local ownership restrictions for radio.

At the time, DMG was a relative newcomer on the radio scene, having bought out Rural Press in 1997. A British-based company, DMG in 1999 owned fifty-five stations along the east coast of Australia. Collingwood noted that many of these were in "information poor areas" and questioned the ability of local stations to maintain high quality local news services, asking: "Is there a clear flow through of influence from owners to program-makers to audience?"⁵ He also pointed out that technology had allowed a significant reduction in staff while producing "highly localised formats".⁶

Some other concerns raised by Collingwood were that once networking became established, many local level jobs would be lost, and that the capacity of regional radio to present local voices may also be lost. At the stage of writing his article, Collingwood also noted that the impact on "local news quality and local level production" was unknown. Ultimately, he stated:

The general claim that one hears often in Canberra policy circles is a familiar technology-driven plenitude argument – essentially that, when the information superhighway rolls out, everyone will have everything. Specific examination of local circumstances is required to answer these general arguments.⁷

This paper provides a point of reflection for Collingwood's concerns, as his article was written prior to the introduction of two commercial stations Sea FM and Hot FM into Rockhampton and Gladstone, Central Queensland. This paper will therefore apply some of these concerns in the form of a specific examination of local circumstances within Central Queensland. Central Queensland is a very large region, and two major cities that comprise much of its service and industrial heart are Rockhampton and Gladstone. Rockhampton, Central Queensland's major service city, has traditionally been an important regional Queensland city. In the 1800s it was the service port for the thriving Mt Morgan gold mine, at the time one of the largest in the world, and throughout the early 1900s, Rockhampton was an important agricultural service centre renowned for its legal, government, and business services. It was the site of one of the first ABC radio stations, and has had commercial radio AM presence since the 1930s.

In the mid-2000s, the city has a growing population that, linked with the Capricorn Coast town of Yeppoon, numbers approximately 120,000. Rockhampton remains a service centre, and is built around agriculture (particularly cattle), education (major schools servicing Central Queensland, plus a TAFE and University), and health (major hospital and health services). It is serviced by a significant local media presence that produces media product for local audiences (see Table 1.1).

Table 1.1 – Media services produced in Rockhampton (May 2005)

| | |
|---------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. WIN TV | Television |
| 2. Morning Bulletin | Print – Daily Newspaper |
| 3. Capricorn Local | Print – Weekly Newspaper |
| 5. 4RO | AM Station |
| 6. 4RK | ABC Local Radio |
| 7. 4YOU | Community Radio Station |
| 8. Sea FM | FM Commercial |

In addition to local media produced in Rockhampton, the city is also serviced by media produced for Gladstone-based and national audiences (see Table 1.2). Rockhampton does not receive Mackay or Townsville-based media products on a regular basis.

Table 1.2 – Media services received in Rockhampton produced elsewhere (May 2005)

| | | |
|---------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------|
| 1. 4CC | Commercial AM radio | Gladstone-based |
| 2. Hot FM | Commercial FM radio | Gladstone-based |
| 3. ABC Radio National | Public Service radio | National |
| 4. Triple J | ABC - Public Service radio | National Youth |
| 5. Classic FM | ABC – Public Service radio | National |
| 6. The Courier-Mail | Print – daily newspaper | Brisbane Metro |
| 7. The Australian | Print – daily newspaper | National |
| 8. The Gladstone Observer | Print – daily newspaper | Gladstone |
| 9. Capricorn Coast Mirror | Print – weekly newspaper | Yeppoon |
| 10. Radio 2 | Commercial Digital Radio | National |

Gladstone, situated some 100 kilometres south of Rockhampton, is a city with a very different demographic base to Rockhampton. It is known as an industrial city, and is the home of Queensland Alumina and Aldoga. Other companies such as ICI, Boyne Smelters, and Comalco are also based, or have significant presence in the city. It is one of the world's busiest industrial ports, and services the significant mining sector based throughout Central Queensland. The population of the Gladstone shire is approximately 35,000. There is a small hospital and a campus of Central Queensland University, but Gladstone is a minor service centre compared to Rockhampton. Gladstone has two local radio stations (one commercial AM, one commercial FM), one newspaper, and is serviced by Rockhampton-based WIN Television (see Table 1.2). Both Rockhampton and Gladstone receive major television networks Channel 10, ABC, Channel 9 (through WIN), Channel 7, and SBS (introduced late 1990s).

Introduction of commercial FM

At the end of 2000, two commercial FM stations simultaneously commenced broadcasting into Rockhampton and Gladstone, from a base in Rockhampton: Sea FM, and Hot FM. They were introduced as the FM sisters to AM stations 4RO (Rockhampton) and 4CC (Gladstone) on the AM band. Sea FM and 4RO were owned by RG Capital Radio, and Hot FM and 4CC were owned by DMG Radio. At the time of the introduction of commercial stations, Triple J was the dominant radio station in the 18-24 year age group in Rockhampton, having enjoyed a share of over 30 per cent of audience in that age group.⁸

At the time of their introduction, Sea FM and Hot FM focused on local morning programs, with much of the day and evening programming being drawn from network feeds. The introduction of these two stations vastly altered the way audience, particularly younger listeners, selected radio stations. The local morning crews of the two commercial stations were "out and about" in Rockhampton. Sea FM's mobile vehicle was the "Sea Cruiser" and Hot FM's mobile vehicle was the "Hot Thunder". As is common with metropolitan counterparts, these vehicles and their crews offered free passes, bread, chocolate milk, local papers and were broadcast using live crosses to the morning crews of the day. The introduction of the stations was popular with the Rockhampton and Gladstone populations, and the 2001 AC Nielsen Radio Survey (#1) in the area revealed that Hot FM and Sea FM had indeed attracted a large share of audience from Triple J and the commercial AM stations,⁹ particularly in the 17-39 age demographic. Initially, the competition between the two stations impacted on programming, particularly when that competition was oriented around the concept of "localism". The focus on "who was the most local" lasted for a couple of years.

The competition between Hot FM and Sea FM in Central Queensland changed in nature when the Macquarie Bank, as Regional Media Pty Ltd, bought both stations in 2004 from RG Capital (August) and DMG (September) respectively. Regional Media also acquired the FM stations' sister AM stations 4CC (AM sister to Hot FM, based in Gladstone) and 4RO (AM

sister to Sea FM, based in Rockhampton). The purchase of Central Queensland stations was part of an Australia-wide acquisition of all regionally based RG Capital Radio and DMG stations by Regional Media. Regional Media is now known as Macquarie Regional Radioworks, and as at July 2005, owns *all* locally produced commercial stations, contrary to regulatory requirements. Rockhampton was one of five cities where ownership regulations were breached upon acquisition of the stations, with Townsville, Cairns, and Mackay in Queensland, and Albury in NSW being the other four. Macquarie has been given one year to sell stations to conform to regulatory requirements, and at this stage, it is unclear as to the approach that will be taken. The one-year deadline ended in September 2005.¹⁰

Since Hot FM and Sea FM were introduced to Rockhampton and Gladstone five years ago, there have been significant programming and ownership changes, culminating in this current state of single ownership by Macquarie Regional Radioworks. In order to examine the progress and changes over this period, we need to review the approach by the stations to their audience and programming.

From the outset, Hot FM targeted a more pop-oriented style of music, with female orientation in terms of its listeners. Sea FM was also pop-oriented, but always had a bit more of a “rock” edge. While radio surveys have not occurred in Rockhampton since 2001, Hot FM emerged as the more competitive of the stations, and in mid-2003, Sea FM changed orientation when it decided to target males and an older age group.¹¹ In order to do this, Sea FM played more Australian rock, as opposed to pop; however, this change was not permanent, and the formatting changed back to a Top 40/pop orientation later that year, with females continuing to dominate (if only slightly) as listeners.¹²

Experiments with formatting and shift combinations have been common in the five-year period the stations have been operational. The general constant has been the morning crews with the exception of one or two major personnel changes: Hot FM’s “Smithy and Trace” were that station’s original breakfast crew, and became “Smithy and Jo” after Trace moved to another city. Sea FM’s original crew of “Nelly and Aaron” eventually became “Nelly and Blunty” after Aaron moved to a later shift and subsequently left the station altogether. At the beginning of 2005, after Macquarie Regional Radioworks acquired the stations, “Smithy and Blunty” emerged as the all-male morning crew on Sea FM, based in Rockhampton. “Kat and Super” took control of the breakfast slot on Hot FM at the same time, but were based in Gladstone.

Competition between the stations, and the change in ownership, appeared to have some impact on the level of network feeds into station programs. In the early days, there was limited local production, with the breakfast shows being produced locally. As competition intensified, particularly in relation to who was the “most local”, network feeds reduced, and Sea FM during 2002 was locally produced throughout the day until 6pm. Once Hot FM became dominant, that station then reduced its local production, and this move was followed

by Sea FM in 2003. During 2004, network feeds increased on both stations to the point that the only locally produced content was again that on the breakfast shows comprising the morning crews.

Almost surprisingly, in 2005, with both stations being owned by the same network, local production appears to have increased. Both Sea FM and Hot FM have more locally produced programming on weekdays and weekends. There does, however, remain a reliance on network feeds (more on Hot FM) as part of regular programming. Once both stations were acquired by Maquarie Regional Radioworks, it appeared that Sea FM was being treated as the "flagship" station, as key breakfast personalities were installed on that station's breakfast program ("Smithy" and "Blunty"). However, the focus on Gladstone by way of local production of Hot FM, including the promotion of previously relatively unknown local presenters, in Gladstone seems to have found a niche. Concerns were initially raised at the end of 2004 in the local press about the impact of ownership on the radio stations on local production.¹³ In fact, the role of presenters as part of the "local community" is currently arguably as evident as previously, and the fact that programs are locally generated is more evident than before. The current weekday schedule is as follows:

| Time | Hot FM | Sea FM |
|-----------|---|---------------------------------------|
| Breakfast | Kat and Super (local) [6-9 am] | Smithy and Blunty (local) [6-9 am] |
| Morning | Kat (local) [9-11.30 am] | Blunty (local) [9-12 pm] |
| Workday | Petoula (networked) [11.30-2 pm] Dave (networked) [2-3 pm] | JoJo (local) [12-4 pm] |
| Drive | The Benchwarmers (networked) [3-6 pm] | Jo-Jo 4-6 pm |

Weekends on Sea FM are also predominantly local during the daytime, with Smithy (mornings) and Kristy (afternoons).

It is interesting to compare the scenario in Central Queensland with the approach taken by the Hot network in south-west Western Australia (also owned by Macquarie Regional Radioworks), where one programming schedule covers an area from Bunbury to Esperance. The population of the Western Australian region is much less than the Central Queensland region. This raises the question as to whether the population of Central Queensland may be enough to generate commercial pressure that favours local programming because of the impact of local advertising revenue in the Central Queensland market. In areas where the population is much less, and there is little commercial pressure to be local, arguments about

loss of local voice and the impact of globalisation still carry much weight. However, there has been argument made that some stations in small areas survive only because of networking, and that “communities in such areas may prefer a networked service to no service at all”.¹⁴ The actual link between population density and consequent commercial pressures for local programming in a regional radio context in Australia is poorly established in an academic sense.

Comparing concerns with what has happened

It is appropriate to now return to Collingwood’s concerns in relation to what has occurred in Central Queensland. His specific concern about the power of DMG as a consolidated owner in regional areas has been complicated by the emergence of Macquarie Regional Radioworks as an even larger single regional radio owner. DMG itself has concentrated its ownership on metropolitan areas with the successful expansion of the Nova network. In Rockhampton, DMG was challenged by RG Capital Radio, and the competition was quite intense while the rival stations competed for audience share. This resulted in intense competition for local advertisers (lower advertising fees for local businesses in order to attract business) and the amount of local programming fluctuated as the stations jostled for audience. Interestingly, the amount of local programming has actually *increased* with one owner in the region. At this stage, one could wonder whether this is as a result of the “cow being fattened before the sale”, and it will be worth monitoring this situation after September 2005.

Collingwood questioned the ability of regional stations to maintain quality local news and local level news production in a networked environment. In relation to local level news production, the change in ownership did influence levels of local news production. Prior to the Macquarie acquisition, Sea FM’s local news was produced on the Gold Coast. Hot FM did have a local news presenter, but news was limited. Currently, news for both stations is coordinated through the Gold Coast Radio Centre. News is broadcast on Sea FM throughout the day, but on Hot FM, local news broadcasts finish at 10am. This discussion is, however, complicated by the notion of actual exposure to local news. Local news was not specifically produced for the demographic prior to the introduction of the commercial FM stations. If, as mentioned earlier, over 30 per cent of people in the area listened to Triple J prior to the introduction of the commercial FM stations, then some 20 per cent of local listeners changed their listening preference to the commercial FM stations. For many, this would have meant exposure to local news, including sport, for the first time since 1996, which was when Triple J was introduced to the area. While there are still no local journalists chasing up local stories, the presenters of the breakfast shows in particular do cover local issues as part of their interaction with local audiences.

How influential are the owners on program makers, and thus audience? Evidence in Rockhampton and Gladstone suggests that audiences are demanding, and local stations and programs have become sites of negotiation.¹⁵ If we are to believe Schlegoff’s notion of

“summons” in relation to communicative acts whereby the telephone ringing is the first act of communication,¹⁶ actually turning on the radio is the first act of interaction between an audience and a station. Radio is then a more interactive medium than print and television, even considering the intervention of “production” when presenters interact with audiences. My research into interaction between presenters and audience/community members has highlighted a significant ability to negotiate identity by local audiences in a regional environment.¹⁷

Have local jobs been lost as a result of technology and networking? Given that the stations were not in existence prior to the end of 2000 as individual entities, it is evident that jobs were created. However, RG Capital Radio owned 4RO and DMG owned 4CC, so employment of new staff was minimal, and related mainly to presenting staff. Local level presenting jobs have fluctuated, due to reasons previously discussed. Collingwood’s assertion that technology has allowed localised formats while reducing staff has certainly appeared to be true, and is most evident during afternoon programs, which have been networked more often than not in the past five years. The “localness” of the program is maintained by the reading (pre-programmed) of the local weather that is inserted after the news, as are local promos for breakfast and weekend crews.

Of most interest is the notion that changes as described by Collingwood reduces the capacity of regional radio to present local voices. Actually, my research to date questions this notion, and I argue that the introduction of the commercial stations into the region has in fact increased the local voice in Central Queensland, particularly within a demographic that had limited media choice a decade ago.¹⁸ The success of Hot FM and Sea FM have relied on the ability to reflect “local”, and this has impacted on the success of networking on both stations. This sense of “local” is represented in this context through presence in the form of obviously local presenters (“drop in to our office in Quay St”/local phone numbers for talk back), and through Outside Broadcasts (OBs), local branding through advertising, and weather calls read by the recognisable voices of local presenters. Rockhampton and Gladstone have seen significant economic upturn with the rise in beef and mining industries during this period, and in the past 10 years many new businesses have opened. OBs are particularly popular, are generally held on weekends, are three to four hour blocks of local time, and paid for by advertisers; importantly, they serve to reinforce the notion of local for listeners who are encouraged to visit the site from which the OB is being conducted.

We can, therefore, argue that the introduction of networked programs in Rockhampton and Gladstone is overly evident, because radio personalities in the cities are in fact built up as being local. Thus, when a networked program is introduced, it is very evident that it is not local. Smithy (formerly Hot FM, now Sea FM), for example, plays in local sports competitions, and in 2004, ran for local council elections. Station promotional vehicles meet and greet locals to give away product, and interaction with local listeners is high.¹⁹ Presenters frequently discuss local issues, and regularly mention local events, including promotion for an

OB or local event coming up. When weather or a promo is inserted into a networked program, the different voice, and indeed accent, is a glaring reminder that the networked program is in fact not local.

However, looking at networking from a regional perspective is complicated. There is a conflict between the loss of program diversity, and the provision of a global “cultural plug” for regional listeners. Networking can provide a means for listeners to plug into a national voice,²⁰ and provide seamless cultural transitions when listeners actually physically move around within Australia. For example, Triple J’s success has highlighted the importance of “virtual world” for youth, and the sense of connection it provides with others who share similar interests.²¹ The importance of being able to plug into a wider world has been central to the historical and cultural development of radio, particularly for those in socially isolated environments.

Conclusion

Peter Collingwood’s concerns about the impact of increasing ownership conglomeration are legitimate; however, the situation in Rockhampton as at July 2005 has revealed that consolidated ownership has resulted in an increase in local voice compared to previous years when there were two competing dominant owners in the region. This has been unexpected, and is contrary to the general gist of Collingwood’s predictions. For listeners in Rockhampton and Gladstone, radio has been a site of negotiation and one where expectations of the commercial imperative over-riding the social imperative in relation to programming, including the use of networked programs into the region, has been continually challenged. Indeed, the social imperative has impacted and driven the commercial in this environment. The key question is whether this will remain the case in the near future.

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¹ Peter Collingwood, “Commercial Radio 1999: New Networks, New Technologies”, *Media International Australia* 91 (1999), 11-21.

² Ibid; John Potts, *Radio in Australia* (Sydney: New South Wales University Press, 1989); Lesley Edmonds, “Wireless Waves as Cultural Glue: Tethering the Bush and the City in Western Australia Between the Wars”, *Studies in Western Australian History* 15 (1994), 92-109; Ian McKay, *Broadcasting in Australia* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1957).

³ McKay, 38.

⁴ Early Australian broadcasting comprised of a two-tier licence system: initially, A Class licenses were financed by listener’s licence fees (collected and then distributed by the Federal Government), and B Class licences were independent, and could be funded by advertising. The A Class stations eventually formed the Federal Government funded ABC network.

⁵ Collingwood, 16.

⁶ Ibid., 17.

⁷ Ibid., 21.

⁸ “Regional Radio Surveys”, *Public Sector Advertising News* 1 (1997), 3.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ In September 2005, Macquarie Regional Radioworks sold its two AM stations to Canberra-based Prime TV to fulfil licence requirements. FM stations Sea FM and Hot FM are therefore still owned by the one organisation.

¹¹ Personal Communication, Sea FM Advertising Manager, 13 June 2003.

¹² Personal Communication, Sea FM Advertising Manager, 18 November 2003.

¹³ “Radio Future is Secure”, *Morning Bulletin*, 24 December 2000, 5.

¹⁴ Standing Committee on Communications, Transport and the Arts, *Local Voices: an Inquiry into Regional Radio* (1999), available online at http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/cita/regional_radio/radioreport.html

¹⁵ Kate Ames, “Girls Get a Voice on Regional Radio: a Rockhampton Case Study”, *Ejournalist* 4, no. 1 (2004), available online at <http://www.ejournalism.au.com/ejournalist/ames.pdf>

¹⁶ Emanuel Schlegoff, “Sequencing in Conversational Openings”, *American Anthropologist* 70 (1968), 1075-95.

¹⁷ Ames.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ *Local Voices: an Inquiry into Regional Radio*, s3.43.

²¹ Kate Ames, “Connection or Corruption: Triple J and Australia’s Regional Youth”, (Master’s Thesis, Central Queensland University, 1997).