



**New media laws and their
impact on the bush**

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The new Australian media laws passed in October have substantially relaxed the restrictions preventing a single operator controlling more than one type of media in a single market.¹ It is worth noting, however, that there was more diversity of program material in the days when regional television and radio stations were owned by a benign monopoly in each market.

When I first went to the bush in 1977 after working for both the Seven and Nine networks, CBN8 Orange and Radio 2GZ were owned by Country Television Services, a company that grew out of the privately owned Ridley family 2GZ company formed in the early 1930s.

With a strong commitment to the Central West and locally committed major shareholdings such as Email Ltd Orange, the radio and television stations were able to deliver heaps of localism to their audience. Radio in particular was a 6am until midnight affair, live and local all the way.

The single television station was able to cherry pick the best of the fare on offer from all the Sydney networks and schedule it around local material that included children's programs, shopping guides, local sports coverage, local news and current affairs and documentaries. Admittedly the localism was somewhat reduced in the years prior to the launch of the domestic satellite, but when Packer lobbied for a national satellite footprint that would have wiped out regional TV, local stations responded by restoring much of their local content.

¹ Broadcasting Legislation Amendment (Digital Television) 2006; Broadcasting Services Amendment (Media Ownership) Bill 2006. Mr Andren's speech from the Second Reading of the legislation in parliament is available at:
http://parlinfoweb.aph.gov.au/piweb/view_document.aspx?id=2622781&table=HANSARDR

However, with aggregation in 1988, when all regional stations had to choose one of three national networks as an affiliate, a steady decline in localism began that today is reflected in a local news on two channels and reader-only updates and weekly magazine program on the other. Regional stations today carry about a quarter, if that, of the local programming that was aired prior to 1988. Similarly, change of ownership and ‘hubbing and spoking’ of local radio stations (despite new licences) has reduced significantly the amount of ‘live and local’ broadcasting on country radio.

The weeks preceding the introduction of the draft legislation to parliament saw much activity by the National Party to win concessions for the bush. The Government’s first draft of media changes, to permit media operators to own as many licences as they liked, was never going to get up—it was the ambit claim, if you like. In fact, the ‘two out of three’ media in one market was the preferred position of the government in earlier manifestations of this legislation.² So there was nothing new in revised legislation, except the urgency to restore the relevance of the National Party as the apparent drivers of reforms on behalf of their constituency.

But whatever limits on cross-media ownership might remain in the laws, plans were well underway for PBL to exploit the new legislation even before the bill was debated in the House of Representatives. James Packer was getting ready for months to sell around 60 per cent of the Nine network, ACP magazines and ninemsn to foreign interests and looks like making a bid for Fairfax. Kerry Stokes moved on *The West Australian* and its other media interests. The rush started before the Governor General’s signature was on this legislation, let alone the ink dry. No

² Preventing a single operator controlling radio, television, and print media in the same licence area.

doubt there will be moves on country media as well, from foreign and local media groups.

Such an outcome was obviously sought through heavy lobbying of some senators: that is not a crime of course, but it would be immoral and should be illegal if election donations in multiples just short of ten thousand dollars are made at the next election...donations that are now completely hidden from public gaze due to recent electoral law 'reforms'.

The original cross-media ownership laws might not have guaranteed local content, especially in radio, but they did guarantee separate control of broadcast and print in each market, and that is the basic foundation on which a government should build localism requirements.

Prime TV's submission to the senate inquiry on the legislation says: 'if the proposed legislation were passed and Prime was allowed to acquire a radio station in Bunbury (in addition to Prime's television station that covers the Bunbury area) local radio news for Bunbury could be sourced from Prime's Bunbury newsroom'.

Herein lies the crucial weakness of the relaxation of cross-media ownership law. While Prime's submission rightly argues that currently the Bunbury radio station gets so called local news from Queensland-based syndication services, the alternative Prime suggests is equally flawed by diminishing diversity within the same market.

If we are now to allow regional ownerships to merge, only the professionalism of individual journalists and editors who would stand up to management and refuse to use generic material stands between

diversity of opinion and common editorial policy. I know which is likely to win out with absentee owners looking at profits rather than public interest.

The Prime TV example is exactly what will occur. Radio and TV will not only see a crossover of material, but cross-promotion and cross-media sales deals that will offer economies of scale with radio and TV commercials sold by the same person at the same time, with bulk deals that will make it extremely hard for any solo medium operator in that market. Apart from that, the common news will be just that—common—and when an advertiser wants a special deal including editorial coverage that will inevitably creep into the equation as well. If pressure is applied to drop an embarrassing story not one outlet but both radio and TV journalists will potentially be compromised.

Prime TV is right when it says in its submission that a wide range of media access is available across regional Australia, and is likely to improve with advances in broadband technology, on line publishing, community radio, pay TV, ABC services and the like.

However free-to-air television, radio and mass circulation daily or bi-weekly newspapers remain the dominant source of local news and commercial advertising and will do so for the foreseeable future.