

Competition to Closure: an analysis of commercial news services in the Central Queensland Rockhampton Region

In the context of the Australian Broadcasting Authority's inquiry of 2001-02 into the adequacy of commercial television services in regional Australia and growing regulatory pressures during 2003, the authors have undertaken a survey of local news and information coverage in the Rockhampton region of Central Queensland during November 2003 in order to 'test run' and assess the ABA's newly recommended local content guidelines for commercial news. In addition to measuring the current performance of the incumbent operator WIN Television, the dominant commercial operator in the Rockhampton district of Central Queensland, the authors provide background on the role of WIN and its predecessor, RTQ7 prior to aggregation in establishing a television audience and identity at regional level. The content analysis of its contemporary news service seeks to identify the major categories of available local news disseminated for the period in question and their relative weighting under the ABA's proposed code.

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In the context of the Australian Broadcasting Authority's recent inquiry into the adequacy of commercial television services in regional Australia (ABA, 2002), this article will undertake a case study of news and information provision in Rockhampton by commercial television providers. It begins by overviewing the current debate and policy issues

associated with aggregation (or equalisation) in regional television and interrogates the capacity or otherwise of commercial operators to sustain local news services in the wake of aggregation and regional competition after 1990. The Rockhampton television market will then be examined as a local case study and an historical overview provided of the key role played by RTQ-7 in the pre-aggregation period. Its subsequent affiliation with the WIN TV Network and the ongoing state based dominance of the latter, as the local incumbent in the post-aggregation period will then be addressed, as well as the implications for its local competitors. Finally, the authors will undertake an eight-week content analysis of Rockhampton's news and information services in order to 'test run' the ABA's newly recommended local content guidelines for commercial television and address ongoing issues raised by the providers themselves in the course of the ABA investigation.

The Australian Broadcasting Authority inquiry into regional television news

In contrast with its predecessor, the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal, the Australian Broadcasting Authority was regarded as a 'light touch' regulator by the media industry. Its Chairman, Professor David Flint, an experienced constitutional lawyer, had previously espoused support for the Coalition's bid to liberalise the cross-ownership laws developed by the Keating government in the 1980's and been the butt of regular criticism by *Media Watch* commentator, Stuart Littlemore, in his previous influential role as head of the Australian Press Council. It was therefore a matter of some surprise when the ABA and Flint responded to the widespread closure of regional television services in late 2001 by announcing an inquiry to ascertain, under existing legislation, the level of responsiveness of regional networks to their audiences and more particularly the adequacy of local television news and information programs in regional and rural Australia (ABA, 2001-02:41).

The trigger for the inquiry was the decision by Southern Cross Broadcasting in November 2001 to close its news bureaux in Canberra, Cairns, Townsville, Darwin and Alice Springs, in the wake of Prime Television's move in June of that year to axe its local news bulletins in Canberra, Newcastle and Wollongong (ABA, 6 December 2002). Under the terms of its inquiry and in response to community concerns, the ABA

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called for submissions from the general public and industry, and convened public meetings in the areas in question. Of the 128 submissions it received, New South Wales (including the ACT) and regional Queensland accounted for some fifty each, confirming the significant levels of regional concern in those states. (ABA, 2002:15). Respondents emphasised the need for television to provide local information and maintain a sense of identity, in the context of ongoing economic and social change.

Arts and sports coverage were also cited as forms of local recognition and pride. Councils were adamant that the loss of one service led to a deterioration in that of the local competitor. In the case of Wollongong, Prime Television's community-based coverage of events, such as school productions and local fairs, was seen as a useful complement to WIN TV's hard news approach (ABA, 2002:46). Regional critics contended that the closures were the culmination of a steady decline in local news services since the mid 1990's. Although the ABA found that there had been an increase in regional news services overall, it also noted that this increase was inconsistent across the four aggregated markets. New entrants after aggregation had not been broadcasting local news in VHF and the existing operators (or 'incumbents') had been broadcasting networked signals rather than local news with the result that some viewers in their submarkets could not access them. (ABA, 2002:41). A common set of concerns, highlighted by the dramatic Canberra bushfires, and shared by Queensland coastal centres, was the ongoing need for local coverage of emergencies. Along with the provision of community information about how to prepare for such contingencies, timely and accurate information in such situations was deemed to be critical (ABA, 2002:43). In the case of Queensland where cyclones posed an ongoing threat, this concern extended to the incapacity of the State Emergency Services in Sydney to 'break into' television broadcasts with weather warnings for far north residents and local emergency workers.

Prime Television's supplementary inquiry submission (24 April 2002) highlighted the differences between regional and metropolitan television industries, pointing to the higher infrastructural requirements of regional broadcasters and the intrinsic commercial disadvantages of serving small, scattered audiences as opposed to large city population concentrations. These structural imbalances, it argued, explain why regional television, with 36% of the national audience, attracted only 22% of advertising revenue (2002:2). In terms of transmission infrastructure, this involved

many new discrete program services and six times as many advertising splits as are required for metropolitan TV. In this respect, the efficacy of aggregation, with its promise of larger and more competitive markets, was now being questioned. Compounding Prime's comments about lower revenues was the complaint that affiliation fees with the metropolitan networks, for programming purposes, had risen during the 1990's, placing pressures on regional operators to cut costs including their local news services.

Although aggregation (or equalisation) was deemed acceptable by regional communities (industry critics labelled it 'aggravation') at the time on the grounds of program provision, a Senate Committee Report warned, in 1987, of the risks to localism before concluding that:

Networking will not necessarily interfere with localism. If the demand for local programming is as strong as the regional licenses claim, the introduction of competitive services may even increase the degree of local programming (in ABA, 2002:51).

Faith in competition and the free market, whether by industry or government, typified public policy in the 1980's. O'Regan (1993:38) notes for example that the introduction of aggregation corresponded with a shift towards self-regulation, a shift evidenced in the ABA's 1987 decision "to lift restrictions on the amount of advertising shown on commercial television". Although the Hawke Labor government invoked local competition and economic factors rather than social influences in support of its aggregation policy, the obligation placed on regional broadcasters to affiliate with national networks concealed monopolistic factors, not least the more limited sources of programming available subsequently to regional operators. Previously, regional television stations were able to purchase programs from any one of the networks and maintain competitive pricing. After aggregation, they were restricted to a single source with the result, Prime argued, that they were unable to mitigate rising affiliation fees imposed by their metropolitan suppliers. These fees had risen from 17% in 1991 to constitute 25% of regional television expenditure in 2001, becoming the second largest source of revenue for metropolitan licences (2002:3-4).

The economics of regional television

Based on subsequent analysis of the documentation supplied to the ABA Inquiry, Wilson (2002:129) concludes that:

The economics of regional television are fragile, with its subordinate status in the ownership regime and thus in power over programming and its elaborate mechanisms for truly local advertising. Aggregation has not delivered the economic benefits foreseen, though the industry argues that there are more news and information services and jobs than there were before the policy was introduced.

Southern Cross Broadcasting (April 2002) went so far as to surmise that the number of regional journalists had doubled, but only WIN produced specific figures (244) to support the claim that it was producing “more individual news stories per week than any other broadcaster in Australia” (19 Feb 2002:3). This meant that it employed on average 12 people in each of WIN’s 20 different regional communities, comprising not only journalists (5 per site) and presenters (2), but also camera crew/editors (2-3) and production staff (2-3).

Southern Cross Broadcasting, the third major regional network, which had closed its bureaux across the country including Canberra, North Queensland and Northern Territory centres, was predictably critical of the ABA’s investigation, pointing out in a submission to the Senate on media ownership, that while its own markets ranged from very small in the case of Darwin to medium sized in the case of Adelaide and Queensland, its largest market, Adelaide with 1.3 million viewers, attracted only 20 per cent of Sydney’s television revenue (April 2002:3). In the case of Queensland, Southern Cross attracted annual revenues of \$133m, a sum comparable to its Adelaide returns. The closure of local news services in southern areas was justified on grounds that “few markets can support multiple local news services that have any prospect of long-term viability” (3).

Like Prime Television, Southern Cross Broadcasting’s justification of the widespread closure of its local news services was primarily based on their cost. It has been critical of optimistic assessments about the viability of regional competition at the time of aggregation and it attributed the

“current surge in affiliation fees”, identified by Prime, to the heavy costs which the metropolitan networks were facing with the introduction of digital television (Southern Cross Broadcasting, April 2002:4-5). The advent of digital television threatened to further expose the ‘fragile economies’ of regional television (Wilson’s term), for while the government would offset initial costs, as it had done at the introduction of aggregation, the regional networks would nevertheless be required to maintain financial commitments thereafter. In an effort to break this cycle, Southern Cross called for the abolition of “punitive licence fees” advocating “targeted subsidies for localism” in those markets where licence relief would be insufficient. (2002:2)

Southern Cross Broadcasting, which services the Queensland coast and operated the Ten Network in Central Queensland sees potential relief for hard-pressed regional broadcasters in the relaxation of the cross-media rules governing the acquisition and ownership of different media in the same market. As a regionally-based group with radio and television holdings looking to develop cross media holdings across the broadcasting sector, it was nevertheless concerned that the retention of localism provisions in the 2002 draft legislation would render any resulting expansion “unattractive in practice” (2002:3). Following the lead of other regional media players like Rural Press and APN in the late 1990’s (Cryle, 1998:85), Southern Cross argued a special case for cross media legislation in regional Australia, not merely on political grounds but because “the economics of regional television are very different from metropolitan television. It is a high cost limited revenue environment” (2002:4). Prior to the withdrawal of its regional news services in 2001, Southern Cross had experimented with different local formats including no charge local community announcements. While these would attract some ABA recognition under its new code (1 point per minute), they would not receive the weighting of the news formats retained by competitors like WIN.

In its initial submission to the ABA inquiry, WIN Television noted that while the ABC had faced similar realities in regional Australia, it had been able to resort to networking and a diminished local presence without having to comply with the ABA’s new conditions. The ABC confirmed this trend in its own submission to the ABA investigation observing that “the economics of television production and broadcasting are such that the medium is delivered largely through national and state/territory

services” (March 2002:5). Attempts had been made within the national broadcaster to reverse this trend during the troubled Shier years of administration, but the capacity to implement regionalisation was compromised by economic factors, not least the capital required for the regional broadcaster itself, to enter the digital era. The closure of Telstra’s communication points around Australia was another practical impediment to local news coverage as television reports “are now according to the ABC more costly and require a great deal more forward planning” (7). The ABC characterised its regional television news services as “one third local (state or territory), one third national and one third international” (6), with *Stateline* on Friday nights offering the only state or territory-based examination of politics and community issues. A similar trend towards state-based recorded services was occurring in WIN local commercial service also.

To sum up the dramatic industry and policy developments in regional television during 2001-02, it was apparent that the ABA, in pursuing its inquiry, had taken community concerns seriously; the submissions of the regional commercial providers, on the other hand, with the possible exception of WIN, continued to regard news provision in pre-eminently commercial terms. Moreover, the abrupt closure of many services in larger regional centres highlighted the unintended effects of the earlier aggregation policy in a competitive market-orientated industry which continued to regard itself as squeezed by metropolitan networks in the post-aggregation era and involved its limited scope for expansion in an attempt to secure cross-ownership and digital conversion concessions.

WIN TV and the Rockhampton region

This section focuses on regional Queensland television and WIN TV as the dominant news provider for the Central Queensland or Capricornia area, comprising Rockhampton, Gladstone and their immediate hinterland (177,784 persons). It includes an historical explanation of the establishment of WIN’s predecessor, RTO-7, in order to demonstrate that despite the advent of aggregation, little competition in commercial news services persisted in the lead-up to the ABA inquiry of 2001-02. Of the three commercial regional television broadcasters implicated in the ABA 2002 Inquiry, the WIN TV network appeared best placed to maintain local news and information services across its eastern Australian markets.

WIN TV and the Rockhampton region

Indeed, one competitor went so far as to label WIN “the good guy in all this” (*Australian* 16-22 Jan. 2003:3). In its initial submission to the ABA investigation, WIN 2002 documented its solid track record in providing half-hourly news bulletins five days a week and locally producing 21 bulletins for 20 regional communities including Canberra, one of the sites where the withdrawal of local news had become an issue in 2001 (ABA September 2002:3). WIN TV’s claim that it provided “more localism, in general, to regional Australians than any other broadcaster” was reiterated in a follow-up submission (WIN, 31 October 2002: 3.4) in which it argued against the further imposition of local programming requirements on the grounds that it had maintained and indeed increased its local television news and information services since the introduction of aggregation.

At the same time however, WIN’s submissions reflected concerns common to the other regional networks about the narrow interpretation of “localism” for the purposes of the new points exercise to be enshrined in the new ABA licence provision. This distinction, mooted by the ABA, between locally-generated news and state or national items with local implications will be addressed later in the quantitative component of this study, not least for its economic implications. While it concurred that localism and local news were essential components of regional television, WIN, like its competitors, emphasised the high cost of local television news production and argued for a broader definition of localism which would embrace regional markets identified during aggregation rather than the submarkets within them (2002:3). In the case of Wide Bay region, for example, WIN provided a news service only to the Sunshine Coast but unsuccessfully sought recognition from the ABA for full regional coverage. The ABA subsequently addressed this ambiguity by distinguishing between local area material and licence material for the purposes of its points quota (ABA, 23 Feb 2004).

In their recent study of British regional television, Negrine and Eyre (1998:40) allude to similar problems for commercial broadcasters in Britain where television markets are also split into sub-regions and where localities receiving the same regional programming may not share strong historical or cultural ties. Unlike most newspapers and radio outlets which cater to local readers and listeners, regional television networks operate across localities and set out to promote broader regional identities which are often “more of a construct that real or unified” (40). This conundrum

applies to Queensland context and WIN Television, in the case of the Wide Bay and Sunshine Coast communities (the ‘Wide Bay region’) but it applies equally to Central Queensland’s Rockhampton and Gladstone (the ‘Rockhampton region’), comprising as they do two very different communities – one coastal and industrial, the other inland and primary producing.

In its final recommendation, the ABA compromised on a number of related issues but retained the points requirement as a statutory allocation rather than simply as an informal code. It waived quota requirements for the four week non-rating Christmas period and proposed a more liberal arrangement in the case of the Northern New South Wales and Queensland areas to be covered. In the case of regional Queensland, it required that only five of the seven broadcasting areas designated under aggregation be serviced (Flint, 2003:4). In Queensland, unlike New South Wales and Victoria which were fully serviced, WIN provided local news in five of the seven designated regional areas. It argued against introducing a news service for Mackay on the basis that “Seven Queensland has a weeknight half-hour news bulletin and a regional with a population of 131,000 cannot support two news services” (2002:5).

Like its rivals, WIN Television entertained serious doubts about the viability of competition in many regional markets. In the case of the Rockhampton broadcasting region, a market comparable with Mackay (comprising 177,784 people) (ABA 2002), the situation was reversed, with WIN continuing to provide the main news service in its dominant position as the ‘incumbent’ broadcaster. Its regular local service was supplemented by the Seven Network’s much smaller (and sporadic) service *Seven Days*. Because of its brevity (approx 1 minute 30 seconds per week) and its emphasis on community notices rather than news, neither *Seven Days* or WIN’s equally brief *What’s On* have been incorporated into the final content analysis

One of the issues facing regional television markets is their capacity to sustain competition under the ABA conditions. The alternative is to withdraw and leave the incumbent as sole news supplier, as had already occurred in both Rockhampton and neighbouring Mackay. Southern Cross Broadcasting, for example, which owned Ten Queensland was adamant that few markets can support multiple local news services that have any prospect of long-term viability (April 2002:3). On the other hand, a

single service may not be deemed sufficient by local residents. The Communications Law Centre, in a submission on the proposed additional conditions, noted that:

This was demonstrated at the public meeting in Newcastle where participants expressed the view that the loss of one competitor had a significant effect on the whole news culture within that city it is our view that there will be some areas where one news service will not be sufficient (October 2002:2)

The Rockhampton region, which comprises both the Rockhampton and the Gladstone centres, has been chosen as a case study in respect of local news provision and for the purposes of testing WIN's claims concerning its ongoing achievements. With its solid reputation in mind and with a view to providing a pilot study of the new ABA local content regime, it is proposed to outline a history of WIN's television news service in Rockhampton both prior and subsequent to aggregation in order to understand its current ascendancy and role in promoting a Central Queensland media identity. Prior to aggregation, WIN's predecessor (RTQ-7) began broadcasting locally in September 1963 (*Morning Bulletin*, 28 Jan. 1997:28). Initially, it drew news material from the *Morning Bulletin* to compile a daily five-minute local bulletin. Within a decade, however, the advent of Australian content guidelines for television increased pressures for local production. In addition to purchasing programming from metropolitan stations, RTQ7 had begun producing its own programs not only news, sport, but also entertainment and variety programs. Bent on capturing a local viewing audience, RTQ-7 involved itself in fundraising and promoting charity and service groups. By the late 1970's, when colour television arrived, its community service role extended beyond news to other information services. A ten-minute segment "Access", was designed to give air time to local organisations (Rockhampton Television Limited, 1978).

By the early 1980's, RTQ-7 was looking beyond Rockhampton and expanded its operations to neighbouring Gladstone, one hundred kilometres to the south. In the same period it launched a successful bid for Capricorn Broadcasters which owned radio stations in Rockhampton, Gladstone and Biloela, with the aim of enhanced cross production and sales. By this time, RTQ was reported as employing:

an independent news room staffed by a 'B Grade' journalist and a cadet with part-time assistance from another journalist with the equivalent of 'C Grade' qualifications. Coverage of Gladstone news was provided by a 'stringer' resident in the area together with visits by news staff from RTQ as required (Australian Broadcasting Tribunal, 1982:9).

One potential complication of the Rockhampton region, recognised by RTQ7 over time has been the rapid growth of nearby Gladstone as a nationally-recognised industrial centre in contrast with the more predictable rurally based economy of its larger neighbour. Consequently, Gladstone became newsworthy in terms of good news development stories in ways that Rockhampton was not. In order to satisfy concerns about local representation associated with the purchase of 4CD Gladstone, the composition of the RTQ Board was modified to incorporate Gladstone interests. After twenty years of local broadcasting, RTQ-7, coined the motto "Serving Central Queensland", an area which extended to the Central Highlands for news, weather and sport. In 1984 when RTQ and 4CD licences were renewed, the claims of the group to local loyalty rested upon a record of active involvement in its target community including assistance to "charitable and service organisations in their promotional and fund raising efforts" and to "educational establishments within the area" by "the provision of on-the-job experience and training for selected students" (Rockhampton Television Ltd, 1984).

By 1987, in the uncertain lead-up to aggregation, RTQ-7, still known as Rockhampton Television, was well placed as the local incumbent to retain its audience. A McNair Anderson survey in the previous year confirmed its improved ratings and prompted the introduction of a new program format along the lines proposed by viewers. Significantly, in the news department, it opened a Gladstone office and upgraded its local news service, now known as 'Seven Central News' from one to three presenters for news, sport and weather. According to Alistair Frew (2003), the state director of WIN News, the Rockhampton news service expanded from triweekly bulletins to a daily half hour service, professionally presented and locally produced. The advent of aggregation in the late 1980's, whereby regional stations were expected to affiliate with metropolitan networks, challenged the stability of regional television arrangements and news services by promising greater local competition and better programming. The consequences, for local production, especially the

cost-intensive processes of news gathering and production, were highly significant, dependent as they now became on the fortunes of the national networks with which regional operators became affiliated. Many in the industry labelled the new policy ‘aggravation’ rather than aggregation, as a scramble for partners and alliances ensued.

It was this point, according to Frew (2003) that WIN Television, originally a Wollongong-based operation, entered the Queensland market and purchased RTQ7 in Rockhampton along with Channel Ten in Toowoomba as part of its inter-state expansion strategy. Of the four regional television markets approved by the federal government under its ‘equalisation’ policy in 1987, WIN TV expanded from its Wollongong base (Southern NSW) interstate into two others (Regional Queensland and Regional Victoria) by the 1990’s, leaving only Northern NSW to its competitors (ABA, 2002:34). Affiliation with metropolitan networks – a last-minute deal in WIN’s case was struck with the powerful Nine Network – would significantly affect its commitment to localism, since the new regional networks were obliged to purchase programming, both Australian and overseas, from their affiliates. In the ensuing shake-out, WIN remained well placed in Rockhampton to sustain its local lead over new entrants, building upon the established reputation of RTQ7 and the national reputation of the Nine Network, with the result that commercial competitors found it difficult to compete. Initially Southern Cross (Ten) provided an hour-long news programme with a 15 minute window for the Rockhampton segments and the new Seven network offered a combined Mackay-Rockhampton service in competition with WIN’s (Nine’s) half-hour local news. However both these newcomers, as elsewhere, found it difficult to compete against the local incumbent with its established audience of a quarter of a century. Subsequently, Channel Ten closed its news operation and Seven followed suit, downgrading its staff from three to one. This left WIN as the main source of local news during most of the 1990s. (Frew, 2003).

WIN’s local television news under the ABA’s points system

Consequently, for the purposes of analysing the Rockhampton TV region, the main focus of the content analysis undertaken here, is on the ongoing WIN half-hourly service (Monday – Friday 6 - 6:30pm). Under the new

WIN's local television news under the ABA's points system

ABA regime, local news attracts 2 points per minute, while material of local significance not necessarily in news format, accumulates 1 point per minute (Flint, 2003:4). In order to fulfil their statutory conditions, licensees in 2004 need to accumulate 120 points per week for 48 weeks per year, with a minimum of 90 points on any given week. On the basis of its news service alone, WIN Television should meet this target comfortably but the calculations of weekly and six weekly points are complicated by the ABA's local news/information distinction and the network's need to compile bulletins with a state rather than a strictly regional or local focus. For this reason, content analysis is complicated by the fact that local news and information are intermingled and attract different point weightings. Moreover, in its second submission to the ABA, WIN argued that the distinction between news and advertisements in its prime time service would further complicate the calculation process on competition and "draw resources away from the creation of these news programs" (WIN, 2002:9). It invoked a precedent for this in the case of the Australian content standard which recognises and rewards local advertising, albeit under a different jurisdiction. CTVA, which acts as umbrella spokesperson for the commercial networks, wanted the points allocation increased to 4 per minute in the case of news, with community information repeats attracting points in the manner of the Children's Television Standard (CTVA, 2002:5).

The content analysis of WIN's Rockhampton news service, presented below in Table One, was undertaken in November 2003 over a four week period prior to the implementation of the ABA's local points system in 2004. Local issues are identified and included as news categories where they comprised eight or more minutes over the period of the survey. For this purpose, individual stories were grouped under a range of broad categories which were generated by the process itself rather than pre-determined. Using the ABA's proposed figure of two points per minute for local news, monthly points were then calculated for each category and monthly/weekly totals arrived at. In relation to their local significance, WIN news stories were assessed by source and actors/voices as well as issue/angle. The monthly (547.13 points) and weekly (136.78) totals confirm that WIN's Rockhampton service meets the ABA's expected weekly content figure of 120 points.

**Table One:
Win Local TV News – Main News Categories (November 2003)**

News Content	Dur x Points	Total
sport	88.14 x 2	176.28
weather	44.15 x 2	88.30
health	19.08 x 2	38.16
crime	17.56 x 2	35.12
emergency services	17.31 x 2	34.62
entertainment	17.05 x 2	34.10
defence	13.50 x 2	27.00
environment	13.06 x 2	26.12
politics	9.29 x 2	18.58
crime prevention	9.18 x 2	18.36
primary industries	8.55 x 2	17.10
law enforcement	8.14 x 2	16.28
tourism	8.03 x 2	16.06
Points		547.13
Points per week accrued over four week period		136.78

A further breakdown of the content categories in Table One confirms that sport and weather constitute by far the largest news categories, attracting 44 and 22 weekly points respectively. In keeping with local news values, sporting items were often more personalised and devoted to local achievers, providing in the process the recognition factor which was deemed essential to a local news service. In other respects, too, local sporting news differed from state and national bulletins, notably in the wide range of codes and activities covered – from swimming, hockey motor racing, rowing and softball to BMX and polocrosse. As with sporting news, the geographic coverage of the weather service tended to be broad, in keeping with the station’s regional identity. In addition to Rockhampton conditions, regular coverage extended beyond coastal towns to include the Central Highlands and the interior.

Of the other significant, but less prominent categories, health services, neglected in the national news or relegated to current affairs, received consistent attention at a time of crisis over compensation insurance, the

retirement of long-serving specialists in the region, a blood bank crisis and continuing high levels of Aboriginal mortality. Of comparable significance was the attention given to emergency services, an issue of considerable importance in the ABA investigation in the wake of the Canberra fires. During the hot November month, WIN focussed on bushfires and the ambulance service, unlike the wetter summer months when storm damage and local flooding with the onset of the cyclone season are ever-present preoccupations. With respect to the categories of crime and entertainment, the local WIN Rockhampton service resembled more closely metropolitan bulletins, although arts coverage (included under entertainment) was not as prominent for Central Queensland as might have been anticipated from the regional input to the ABA's investigation. Because the content analysis focussed on a relatively short period (four weeks), one reason for the relatively low arts coverage may be seasonal, or it may reflect WIN's hard news rather than community emphasis.

The calculations included in Table One are subject to a range of caveats associated with content analysis, not least, monthly fluctuations, news cycles and the blurring of sponsorship and advertising in prime time news programs.

It is also confined to WIN TV as the sole commercial provider in Central Queensland before the new ABA licence provision came into force in February 2004. Consequently, the concession to the networks by the ABA, namely the inclusion of a one point per minute quota for matters deemed to be of local significance but not presented in news format, is an untested component of the new points system for the purposes of this analysis. As WIN Television has itself pointed out, a lack of clarity persists about what constitutes localism, with the networks advocating a broader definition to enable them to broadcast items across the sub-regions they serve. The ABA (2002:68) has conceded that its definition of localism incorporates covering "the effects in the area of an event that occurs elsewhere", but casts some doubt over this concession when it excludes rural issues like drought as too general to qualify for local points (17 December 2002:4).

Nevertheless, the new licence provision appears to have elicited a prompt response from the regional networks, not least from Prime and Southern Cross which had each initiated new closures in 2001. While Prime has

followed the example of WIN in offering half hour daily news bulletins in other states, Southern Cross which broadcasts in Central Queensland has opted for a mix of news updates, a weekly community information segment and a half hour weekend current affairs program, thereby avoiding a duplication of WIN's hard news format (ABA, 2004). With the added commitment by Seven Queensland elsewhere in the state, the issue of improved regional news coverage appears to have been substantially addressed. Rather than opt for the light regulatory touch with which it has been associated, the Australian Broadcasting Authority appears to have acted in the public interests with flow-on effects throughout eastern Australia.

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