



How Australia gets its TV news

How diverse are the news sources of metropolitan television networks?

It did not take very long for Australian governments to recognise the power of broadcast media. In 1935, only twelve years after the birth of the commercial radio broadcasting industry, the Lyons government introduced multiple interest limits in response to concerns about increasing concentrations of ownership. Since then, the need for the public to be presented with a diversity of views and opinions has continued to be a pressing issue for governments. Successive attempts have been made to promote the public interest through legislation regulating ownership and control of broadcast licences. Without exception, these attempts have proved controversial.

In its 1996 *Better Communications* policy statement, the Coalition committed itself to examining the 'chaotic and inconsistent media laws', about which there was 'no evidence that the public had benefited'. In its Issues Paper for the current review of the cross media ownership rules, the Coalition has undertaken to examine their effectiveness 'in meeting the Government's policy objectives of plurality, diversity and competition as the central public interest considerations in media regulation.'

It is not clear whether regulation of ownership is sufficient to guarantee diversity of viewpoints or any of the other objectives of the current Act. These objectives include:

- promotion of a diverse range of services offering entertainment, education and information;
- promotion of the role of broadcasters in developing and reflecting a sense of Australian identity, character and cultural diversity; and

- encouraging responsiveness (for commercial and community service providers) to the need for a fair and accurate coverage of matters of public interest and appropriate coverage of matters of local significance.

The Issues Paper notes that 'diversity has several dimensions' and queries the efficacy of the assumption that there is a nexus between diversity of media ownership and diversity of views which underlies past and present regulatory regimes. The paper also refers to the issue of 'globalisation' and its implications for plurality and diversity of voice in Australia.

The Centre's research paper

The CLC has undertaken a study of television news as a way of looking at issues of diversity that go beyond the question of ownership and control. (Australians have consistently shown a strong preference for television over other forms of media as a source of news and information). Whether television meets public interest objectives depends on more than simply the provision of a number of conduits. It also depends on:

- whether news programmers are using, or have access to, diverse sources of news;
- whether more sources would lead to a greater diversity of news coverage; and
- whether the existence of more news services is likely to result in the presentation of a diversity of viewpoints.

The Centre interviewed the Directors of News or their nominees from

the Sydney offices of the Nine Network, Network Ten, ABC TV, SBS TV and Sky News Australia. As far as possible, each was asked to provide a *network* perspective. Channel Seven in Sydney did not participate in the study, although an interview was conducted with the Director of News at Channel Seven in Perth regarding practices at his station. Interviews were also conducted with the Director of News at Imparja Television and senior reporters at ABC TV, SBS TV, Channel Nine in Sydney and Prime Orange.

Interviews

Interviews were based on a series of open-ended discussion points including:

- how an 'Australian' perspective is given to international news stories, especially those sourced from outside agencies;
- international and domestic staffing structures;
- sources of international and domestic news stories;
- the effect of aggregation on news programming at metropolitan and regional stations;
- hours of news and current affairs programming per week;
- audience preferences and other factors influencing choice of stories; and
- the effect of technology and future developments on news programming.

Comparative tables summarising the use of international news sources, staffing, and programming time appear in the Centre's research paper, together with outlines of the interviews.



International news sources

A major issue addressed was the sourcing of international news stories. As it is expensive - and often logistically difficult - to gather these stories independently, a significant proportion is purchased from international news agencies. The major agencies have long been headquartered in the United States and Europe, particularly the United Kingdom. Studies conducted through the 1970s and 1980s, including those associated with UNESCO's New World Information and Communication Order, identified this practice as a cause for concern because:

- the gathering and distribution of international news stories - particularly broadcast news - was controlled by a small number of major news agencies;
- resources were concentrated on the types of stories these agencies see as servicing their major customers;
- there was an overall tendency for the information needs of smaller broadcasters - including the major broadcasters of smaller nations - to be poorly serviced; and
- there was an associated tendency for smaller nations to be covered in less depth or in a negative light.

When not using their own bureaux or field staff, all broadcasters, particularly commercial broadcasters, tend to rely on a similar range of international news sources. Most interviewees were reasonably satisfied with such material. However, most agreed that there were regions that were poorly covered by the main suppliers of international news. These included South America, Africa, and New Zealand.

As to whether or not reliance on news sourced from agencies based

outside Australia meant that it might be difficult to ensure an Australian perspective, or whether there was a risk that news of importance to Australians would simply not be reported because it might not be of significance to US or UK controlled sources, interviewees expressed a range of opinions, including:

- there is no particular perspective/agenda inherent in the material received from agencies;



- well trained local journalists are able to maintain objectivity and provide an 'Australian' perspective to news sourced from outside;
- if the story was important enough the network would send its own people; and
- while most stories on South American countries dealt with riots and major disasters, this is not really a problem as 'the audience is just not interested' in other types of stories about that part of the world.

Domestic news

On the domestic news front, interviewees from the metropolitan stations indicated a general satisfaction with their ability to cover and present news of relevance to their audiences. Some noted that aggregation had caused some minor problems in obtaining material from regional stations, although this was not cause for particular concern: as one interviewee expressed it, 'If it's [a story] big enough

to be on the national news, it's big enough for us to send a crew'.

Interviewees from the two regional stations felt that they were providing a good service for their audiences. In their view, news produced by metropolitan stations did not always meet the needs of the regions. 'City news' also contained items about regional issues from time to time that were facile, insulting to rural people and, in some cases, simply wrong: 'they send in a team, do a one-off and go away. If they get the facts wrong...they are not around to face the consequences and we have to deal with it'. Sydney news was also described as 'parochial'.

Advances in technology were seen as both beneficial ('we can get more news faster') and detrimental (it also increases the chance of getting less depth of analysis or explanation). More news stories are being covered in news bulletins than in the past - the Nine network bulletin currently covers 18-19 items in the two news breaks before the sports report. In 1993 it covered seven. The increase was explained by audience preferences and expectations.

While news sources may be influential on the type of news we are seeing, it is likely that decisions about news values and audience preferences are at least as big a factor in any narrowing of the range and depth of both domestic and international stories presented.

So although we might not be getting a full range of views and information, perhaps it's because it's what we want. Maybe it's time to start wanting more. □

Lucy York

'How Australia gets its TV news' was prepared with financial assistance from the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance. The full research paper is available from the Communications Law Centre for \$35.