

# Switched On: A History of Regional Commercial Television in Australia

## Abstract

*Switched On* offers the first dedicated history of regional commercial television in Australia. It challenges previous scholarship which positions that history as a mere extension of – or footnote in – the development of Australia’s three metropolitan commercial television networks. Rather, this study argues that regional commercial television was, at its height, a significant and independent industry at the economic and social centre of regional communities, employing around 2,000 people and producing many hours of programs for local audiences. It then traces and examines key developments which have resulted in regional commercial television being dominated by three super-networks which largely operate as “slaves” to their metropolitan “masters” with minimal local production.

The project analyses data from interviews, government files, company records, photographs, manuscripts and audio-visual material held in the National Archives of Australia, National Film and Sound Archive, local, state and national libraries, station archives and private collections. The result is a periodised industrial history which traces the establishment, development, maturation, equalisation and disruption of regional commercial television. This broad-brush approach is enhanced through the inclusion of individual station case studies.

This analysis reveals that regional stations initially achieved a balance between local relevance, community involvement, operational efficiency, innovative programming, independent ownership and financial viability. It then demonstrates – through the use of a unique localism-independence index – how political, technological, economic and social forces have, over a 60-year period, resulted in the irrevocable merging of metropolitan and regional commercial television interests.

In many respects, the current structure of regional commercial television emulates a model which was first proposed by metropolitan media interests in the 1950s. Ongoing threats to the regional commercial television business model point to the possible future demise of the industry as a distinct entity. In this context, this thesis makes a significant contribution to recording the history of a rapidly changing and

evolving industry which has held an important role in the economic and social development of regional Australia.