

Switched On: A History of Regional Commercial Television in Australia

Background

My interest in the story of regional commercial television has resulted from direct involvement in the industry. As a school boy in the pre-aggregation years of the 1970s and 1980s, I recall having a choice of just one commercial television station and the ABC. My local station, CWN Central Western Slopes (Dubbo, NSW) was itself a direct relay of CBN Central Tablelands (Orange, NSW). The station produced a range of news, sport, children's, women's, rural and other programs of interest and relevance to the communities it serviced. It also cherry-picked what management considered to be the best national and imported programs from the three metropolitan networks as well as international distributors and independent producers. In 1986 and again in 1988, I had the opportunity to undertake work experience in the station's Orange newsroom. I recall the station was a hive of activity with 80 or more employees working across the company's television and radio operations. While my life took me in a completely different direction, those experiences left a positive, permanent impression which would ultimately inspire me to join the industry.

Fast-forward almost 20 years, and I was working as a journalist, producer and presenter for WIN Television in Rockhampton, where the RTQ studios acted as the network's main production centre for Queensland. (A second, smaller facility was located in the former DDQ studios in Toowoomba.) We produced four regional bulletins and weather inserts, numerous news updates and a state-wide *WIN News Late Edition* each weekday. In addition to reporting for the Rockhampton bulletin, I also had the opportunity to produce news bulletins and present news updates for other markets. But such experiences were the exception rather than the rule, as production was increasingly centralised to national broadcast centres in far-away places. Unsurprisingly, many of my younger colleagues knew nothing of the industry they were inheriting. There was a common belief that the regionals were simply an extension of the metropolitan networks (with local news and advertisements) and that this was how it had always been.

My time in the industry had also piqued my interest in its history. I was keen to understand the reasons behind the changes which had occurred since visiting the Orange station in the 1980s, and I was intrigued to find that next to nothing had been written about the history of regional commercial television. In particular, I wanted to know more about the programs, people, places and practices which had underpinned the industry, especially in the years before aggregation. The result is this thesis, which is the first dedicated history of regional commercial television in Australia. This study has been deliberately broad-brush in nature. My aim here has been to provide a foundational history which I hope will provide a springboard for further scholarly inquiry into this topic.