



**Tim Whetstone MP**

Member for Chaffey



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## **Submission**

# **Regional Television Local Content Investigation 2013**

**August 2013**

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## **Introduction**

As a Member of the South Australian Parliament for the regional electorate of Chaffey, I would like to provide comment to the Regional Television Local Content Investigation 2013.

## **Background**

In regional South Australia local television content has been an important asset for the community for a number of years. In Chaffey, an electorate based in the Riverland and Mallee in South Australia, television content has continually provided locals with news, current affairs, local event information, political analysis, sports coverage and special event programming. The majority of local content on television in the Riverland and Mallee is provided by WIN Television. ABC also provides Chaffey content on a limited basis via its news bulletins and recently hired a news video journalist in the region; an appointment which has been welcomed.

On 18 February 2013, WIN Television network announced its decision to axe its local regional news services in the Riverland and South East. This decision was met with disappointment from the local community which has relied on the news bulletin as a vital source of information and engagement for more than 30 years. The decision clearly reflected a lack of consultation with local communities prior to ending Chaffey's sole local news service. Not only did the region lose the local news service but this decision also resulted in fewer job opportunities for young and aspiring journalists in regional South Australia.

The Riverland not only lost a valued source of information but the region was also inflicted with a loss of local jobs, including those of young journalists. With the axing of WIN Television's local news bulletin in the Riverland and South East, ten editorial staff were made redundant. It was also very disheartening to learn that South Australia is the only state where legislation does not govern local content. The result of this is that by discontinuing such a service the station did not breach any of its legislative obligations to provide local content under its licensing conditions.

With a potential audience of 127,300 across the Riverland and South East, the news service was provided by WIN Television as the only local commercial television broadcaster. The WIN news services were continually wound back before its demise, with the merging of separate news bulletins in Loxton and Mount Gambier in 2010. Local news was collected from the regions but presented from WIN's Adelaide station prior to the bulletin ceasing all together.

In response to WIN Television's decision to discontinue the local news service, I met with South Australian Premier Jay Weatherill and Minister for Regional Development Gail Gago. I have also written to the ACMA seeking information regarding WIN's licence obligations and sent letters to the regional commercial broadcasters seeking their intentions as WIN's licence will expire in 2014. I have also liaised with South Australian Senator Anne Ruston, member of the Senate Environment and Communication Reference Committee, as well as made contact with the Senate Committee in regards to the ABC's obligations to provide a regional news service. Currently WIN television broadcasts in 27 markets across Australia, including Adelaide and Perth.

The importance of a regional news service in the Riverland is something that the people of the region did not previously take for granted. Regional people now have to rely on city-focused news bulletins produced out of Adelaide with brief, if any, stories from the region.

### **1. What are the local information needs of people in regional areas of Australia?**

In regional areas such as Chaffey, covering approximately 16,400km<sup>2</sup>, local information is extremely important in the fabric of the community. The media plays a vital role in distributing information to the public, keeping people informed and helping to involve the community in local events.

Local information important to regional areas such as Chaffey includes:

- General news about people and events in the community;
- The community view or opinion on events happening locally, across Australia and the world that impact the local area;
- News and information that impacts the local economy, businesses and industries;
- Sporting events;
- Weather, with a particular focus on local conditions;
- Community services, including local charity events;
- Keeping the community up-to-date with key local figures such as politicians and mayors;
- Information about the features of the region for both locals and tourists.

There is no doubt that regional television is an institution in regional South Australia and many community members rely on television broadcasts for important information.

### **2. How important are sources of media such as local newspapers, radio and the internet (including social media) in providing access to local information in regional areas of Australia?**

Regional areas of South Australia are generally privileged to have such as a diverse range of media options for the community to source local information. In Chaffey, there are eight newspapers that are circulated throughout the region, along with three radio stations. Each newspaper and radio station also has an online presence. Unfortunately the region recently lost the local free newspaper titled the 'Riverland Weekly', which was forced to close its doors earlier this year.

Sources of media in Chaffey include:

- The Murray Pioneer (distributed twice per week, circulation of 6000)
- The River News (distributed weekly, circulation of 2450)
- The Loxton News (distributed weekly, circulation of 2300)
- The Border Times (distributed weekly, circulation of 1000)
- The Mildura Weekly (distributed weekly)
- The Advertiser (including the Sunday Mail)
- The Murray Valley Standard which publishes Mallee content
- The Leader which publishes Swan Reach and surrounding area content
- ABC Riverland Radio
- Magic 93.1 Radio
- Radio 5RM

The role of social media is becoming increasingly prevalent in the distribution of local information. Facebook can provide up-to-date news and information but this content is not regulated. This lack of regulation means local content sourced from social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter can be misleading and inaccurate.

Many of the print and radio sources in the region have regularly updated and accurate social media pages.

### **3. How important is commercial television in providing access to local information in regional areas of Australia?**

Extensive local content is provided through both print and radio media in the region but the community should be afforded as much choice as possible. Without a local television news program, the community can no longer choose to access Chaffey information from this source. Generally any major stories, such as accidents or emergencies, are reported on statewide television news services but without a local news provider items such as community events and local stories will simply not air on television.

Commercial television is widely watched throughout Chaffey and in the past has been used as a prime source of local information. There is a difference between sourcing information on television as opposed to other forms of media. The visual aspect appeals to a number of community members and gives people the chance to put across their opinions through a live visual image and audio. Overall, it is about the choice of being able to access local information from all mediums, including television. One's choice should not be compromised or disadvantaged by living in a rural or regional area.

### **4. Have there been any significant changes to the delivery of local information in regional areas of Australia in recent times?**

Unfortunately Chaffey has seen a reduction in the amount of local information available due to the loss of WIN Television's local news bulletin and the closure of an extensively circulated newspaper, the 'Riverland Weekly'. The decrease in sources of local information has resulted in a decrease of competition within the local media network. Many of the media options in the region also rely on advertising, which dictates the size of a newspaper or the amount of time allocated for radio content. The challenging economy that has impacted local businesses has had a flow on effect on the ability to make local information available.

### **5. Do people living in regional areas of Australia have adequate access to local information?**

Communities in regional areas face a number of challenges when accessing local information. The vast distance between regional communities and information outlets, often in metropolitan areas, certainly has an impact. Another area which can restrict access to local information is the lack of public transport in regional areas and limited internet coverage and phone reception. Chaffey has a number of black spots in regards to telecommunications. People involved in the horticultural and agricultural industries in Chaffey are often located on farms with poor reception and therefore cannot adequately access local information for prolonged periods.

In regional towns there is also strong competition for the limited space and time in the media to distribute local information.

## **6. How can access to local information best be maintained and enhanced in regional areas of Australia?**

Maintaining and enhancing access to local information is integral to regional communities and will be a challenging aspect in the years to come. Competition within local media is crucial to continue distributing local information. Chaffey currently has a diverse choice of print, radio and online media to distribute local information. Unfortunately community members are limited to information from advertisements only on local television channels.

As the Broadcast Services Act currently stands, South Australia is not on the same playing field as regional areas of New South Wales/ACT, Victoria, Queensland and Tasmania when it comes to local television content. In South Australia, there is no obligation to provide a minimum amount of local news content. This loophole means that the Riverland and Mallee has lost out as a result and now has limited content on local television stations. The argument put forward is that South Australia is not big enough to have distinct regional television areas, in respect to local content requirements.

Television is a respected medium that is trusted by the community. WIN Television has delivered regional news content in the region for more than 30 years. Following WIN Television's decision to withdraw its local news bulletin earlier this year, the community found it difficult to understand how South Australian regulations on local content differed from those interstate.

### **Conclusion**

The loss of WIN Television's news bulletin in the Riverland has had a significant and detrimental impact on the amount and quality of local information available to the Chaffey community. Regional communities rely on local media to deliver relevant and topical news, tailored to their interests and adapted to the issues happening around them. As we lose local news providers we also gradually lose competition between news services and ultimately quality of the news that is available. Individuals and families living in rural and regional areas deserve choice, and they deserve a service that wants to and will report on local issues and community events.