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Submission prepared on behalf of Seven Queensland by the Director of News, Rex Clark.

Submission No. 10

OVERVIEW:

This submission is designed to support and complement that of our network partner, BTQ Seven Brisbane. We share fundamental ethical and practical concerns about the broadcast of sittings of the Queensland Parliament.

The purpose of this submission is to address additional issues that impact specifically on Seven Queensland as a television broadcaster operating in regional Queensland.

BACKGROUND:

Seven Queensland provides five local news services ("Seven Local News") at 6-6:30pm Monday to Friday. Separate news bulletins are produced specifically for communities served by newsrooms in Cairns, Townsville, Mackay, the Wide Bay (Hervey Bay and Bundaberg) and Maroochydore.

The editorial content is produced in newsrooms in each of those centres. The exceptions are items that may be shared between regions where a topic is of common interest, such as tourism, sugar cane, and the Great Barrier Reef.

The emphasis is on purely local material. For example, Mackay's news service is almost entirely about Mackay. Some may describe our content as parochial, because we cover items down to the level of road closures, new traffic lights, local hospital concerns, junior sport, school choral music festivals and so on.

Items of a purely national and international nature are left to our network's National News services, particularly Brisbane's news service which is shown in our regions at 6:30pm.

We believe our localism is the most significant factor in our success.

For 2007, the industry's independent audience surveys, conducted by RegionalTAM (Television Audience Measurement), showed the average audience for Seven Local News across was 198,000 people per night. That represents an annual growth rate of eight per cent.

POLITICAL MATERIAL

By its very nature, Seven Local News places a heavy emphasis on matters of a political nature. That includes local government, State Government and Federal Government issues. We enjoy a constant flow of publicity material from elected

representatives, departments and authorities from each sphere. We also seek out those representatives

Such coverage comprises an important and significant part of the service we provide to our local audiences. Because of our specifically local focus, our scope is much more detailed than what may be usually expected from a metropolitan news service that is serving much bigger populations with much more diverse interests and priorities.

By the same token, because we do not have to cover broader state, national and world affairs, we have fewer constraints on the time available for matters of local interest. In fact, we are often actively seeking material to fill our bulletins as much as possible with only locally-produced items.

Political material represents a constant and useful source of such stories, particularly through locally elected members as well as departments and authorities of the various levels of government.

Therefore, any proposal to review the method of recording and broadcasting proceedings of the Queensland Parliament, is likely to have far-reaching ethical and practical implications on our News service, and its operation.

PARLIAMENTARY BROADCASTS

Our commitment to serve local communities with local news, extends beyond the coverage of events that happen within the region. Many issues of local significance are decided or influenced by events elsewhere, such as Brisbane, where Seven Queensland does not have its own dedicated resources. We rely on our network colleagues to provide such links.

Parliamentary broadcasts are one of the most significant examples.

Many issues raised in and around Parliamentary sittings are of vital interest to our various newsrooms, but not to metropolitan news services. For example, the announcement of a proposal to expand port facilities in Mackay would be of no interest to a media outlet serving only Brisbane. But it would possibly be the biggest story of the day for our Mackay newsroom. Colleagues working within our network would be aware of

At present, Seven Brisbane's representatives in the Parliamentary Gallery provide a crucial conduit in such cases. We simply do not have the staff or the time to sit and watch the proceedings in full. Our Seven colleagues monitor the proceedings, identify segments of interest to our various local newsrooms, assess of the news value of those items to particular regions, edit down the parliamentary segments according to the assessment or their news value to our markets, and transmit the item without the network system to the particularly newsroom that has an interest in the item.

The process also works in reverse. Our newsrooms will often be aware that an issue of local importance is to be raised in Parliament on a particular occasion. At present, we are able to make a request directly to our Gallery representatives to monitor the proceedings accordingly, edit the relevant segment, and transmit the material to the newsroom within our time constraints.

I'm sure other submissions will deal in depth with the ethical issues associated with the broadcasts. However, it is important to appreciate that people in more remote areas rely on television news services for their coverage of Parliament.

It is therefore crucial that we have full access to all aspects of the proceedings, even if they are not always favourable to those involved. Part of our ethical obligation is to provide a balance by recording and broadcasting the reaction, involvement and responses of various participants, such as the local member, the Minister and the Opposition spokesperson. We can ensure our needs and interests are met through direct consultation with our Gallery representatives. Because we are bound by the same ethical ideals and obligations, the current arrangement means we can also be assured the Parliamentary material available to us is completely objective and free of any suspicion of partisan influence.

Satisfying our diverse needs depends on speedy and accurate delivery of material required in individual newsrooms. The key is to have that material identified and made available quickly and efficiently. For that, the involvement of our network colleagues in the Gallery, and our ability to liaise directly with them, is crucial.

To provide five completely separate and different News bulletins each day, our newsrooms operate on extremely tight deadlines. Our operation can easily be jeopardised by any delay in the delivery of material as vital as parliamentary proceedings.

We would be concerned if the provision of that material relied on a centralised system with which we had no affiliation or relationship. Even with the best of intentions, it would be difficult to have confidence in a system that has no understanding of, or interest in, our distinct and diverse requirements.

In summary, because of our remoteness, our news service depends specifically on our relationship with our own network to meet our extensive and diverse needs throughout regional Queensland. Our reliance is amplified by the need to constantly reassess developments as an issue or debate evolves, according to own news values and the interests of the various communities we serve.

The existing arrangements serve us well. However, we have serious reservations about any mechanism that could impact on our existing freedom and ability to provide full and balanced coverage of parliamentary proceedings.

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