



CU's 100th Issue

On the historic occasion of CU's 100th issue, it seems appropriate to record the lamentably under-researched history of how CU began.

Like so many different developments in the spread of information in Australian communications, CU owes a debt to the late Professor Henry Mayer, since the idea for the newsletter was hatched at the splashy retirement dinner held for Henry by the communicaterati at Sydney's Imperial Peking restaurant in early 1985.

A few months earlier, in November 1984, a number of trade unions and public interest groups with mutual concerns about being locked out of debates on the critical policy issues then emerging, had formed a new coalition, the Media and Communications Council (MACC). Members included such groups as the AJA, the ATEA, Actors Equity, the Australian Council for Childrens Film and Television (ACCFTV), the NSW Council of Social Services and the Public Interest Advocacy Centre (PIAC). On the night of the dinner, MACC had just won the significant victory of having both the Department of Communications and the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal agree to hold regular consultations with the group, and among the (slightly inebriated) MACC members at the dinner, talk turned to the problem of how to make the new coalition viable and effective.

Henry, effusive as ever, insisted a newsletter was needed. Barbara Biggins, of ACCFTV, probably still sober, was lamenting the lack of resources to pay for such a publication. Col Cooper of ATEA, probably not as sober, generously offered that if she wrote it, the ATEA would print it and post it. After all, at that stage MACC was an organisation of modest dimensions! Never one to shirk a little effort, Barbara did write it, in fact editing the first 27

issues, which proved to have a saleable popularity well beyond MACC member organisations. PIAC also helped with production. The newsletter was then a digest of what was happening in communications policy - a witness to such developments as the FDU Report and equalisation, Sky Channel and Club Superstation, radio deregulation, area inquiries, VAEIS, and the proposal to amalgamate the ABC and the SBS, not to mention new media cross-ownership rules and the 1987 take-overs that led to the shake-up of the media industry as we knew it.

In late 1987 the sense of change and crisis in communications led the Law Foundation of NSW to provide support and funding for the establishment of the Communications Law Centre, affiliated with the University of NSW Law Faculty. The new centre lifted CU from Barbara's then weary shoulders, and under Liz Fell's editorship, in 1988 CU became a 12 page monthly review of communications, expanding into reporting on telecommunications, journalism and the print media, and providing a more regional perspective on communications development. Gil Appleton became CU's third editor with issue 41 in February 1989, and it is largely due to her energy, her editorial flair and her dedication that CU has become the solid, analytical, and comprehensive publication it is today. CU is now an important resource in Australian communications policy, the only publication analysing such issues from the perspective of MACC member groups. Its survival, growth and success is a tribute to those who worked to begin it, and who work now to produce it, especially Gil, who has now edited almost 60 of the 100 issues. It continues to be an invaluable asset to those looking for critical analysis of communications policy developments. Congratulations to us!

Kate Harrison

POLICY MAKING

If the community is to successfully influence the future direction of broadcasting policy in Australia, it must first have some understanding of the new technologies and the options they have to offer.

The knowledge of future technology should not become the sole province of 'the industry' otherwise we will face another AUSSAT situation where the concept is first put in place, then campaigns organised to have the very foundations of broadcasting policy altered so that the technology can be fully exploited and become 'cost effective'.

**CU Number 1,
March 1985**

THE MYSTERY OF THE MISSING AMENDMENTS

Amendments to the Broadcasting and Television Act dealing with the standards-setting powers of the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal were unexpectedly dropped from a package of amendments scheduled for the May 7-29 session of Federal Parliament.....

The unexpected dropping of the standards powers amendments is something of a scandal. [CU] had been informed that the amendments were in the Bill. We could not get confirmation that they had been removed until the day of the Minister's speech to the House. When, plainly, the Minister wanted to proceed with them, the Tribunal needed them and the public wanted them, why did industry 'concerns' prevail?

CU 3, June 1985

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THE SLOW DEATH OF LOCALISM

[T]he regionals are being left to foot the bill for government policy, with a substantial amount of help from the taxpayer. This scenario must delight the major beneficiaries from equalisation who know that equalisation will lock the regionals into national networking arrangements. The networks which dominate program supply and which can also control national advertising revenues, will have total dominance over a regional licensee struggling to program three outlets. In effect, Packer's 1977 plan for three national networks will be in place, without the networks outlaying a single dollar.

CU 6, August 1985

THE BIG ABC SQUEEZE

In response to the announcement that the ABC would receive \$413m for 1986/97 (a cut of \$30m) the ABC board has decided that 300 staff - 4.4 per cent of the 6750 staff - will have to go.....

The Government seems happy to expend millions on expanding commercial TV services in Australia, in a move which will lead to more networking and less localism on commercial TV. At the same time, its savage cuts to the ABC may ensure the death of localism on our national broadcaster.

CU 17, August 1986

.....AND AGAIN

The ABC Staff Union say that the latest restructure proposal shows the chairman and managing director have 'capitulated to partial privatisation' and

'abandoned the fight to maintain the ABC even with its current level of funding'.....

As evidence of the strategy to partially privatise the ABC, [Arthur] Duncan [chief industrial officer] points to proposals to:

- *contract out TV drama, variety and children's programs to private production companies*
- *shed vital production resource staff in wardrobe, makeup, design and graphics and buy these in as required;*
- *sell off outside broadcasting facilities other than in Sydney and Melbourne and buy these in - if they are available.*

Somerville and Hill have 'taken the easy option of making the ABC an avenue for directing public funds to the private sector'.....he says.

CU 34 May 1988

PLUS ÇA CHANGE..... THAT ELUSIVE 'UMBRELLA' ACT

[W]e are maintaining two completely different licensing regimes in the Broadcasting Act and the Radiocommunications Act, but the criterion which divides them (the slippery definition of broadcasting) is the product of a past era. Fifty years ago it made sense to classify services broadly as either interpersonal or intended for reception by the general public.....These days we are seeing more and more services which are not really intended for the undefined general public, but are not person-to-person either. Our current legal structure is directing our minds to the wrong questions - instead of being forced to decide whether the service is or is not broadcasting, we should simply be able to concentrate on the rules that are appropriate to that kind of service.

Leo Grey, quoted in CU 17, August 1986.

SO WHAT ELSE IS NEW?

The Department's separate reviews of broadcasting and VAEIS regulation, Pay TV and now Remote TV, suggest it is formulating policy in a piecemeal fashion. This approach to Australia's most popular cultural industry plays directly into the hands of those who believe it is simpler to leave policy making to 'market forces'.....

The development of a comprehensive future-oriented information policy - including regulation and licensing of audiovisual services - is basically about Australia's cultural future.

The danger is that the economic 'dries' in Canberra will take the easy way out and leave policy making to market forces because it is just too hard.

CU 39, October 1988

CROSS MEDIA RULES, OK?

The incestuous nature of the interlocking companies and directorships provides this small clique of proprietors [Fairfax, Packer and Murdoch] with perhaps the most effective grip on the instruments of national media that could be witnessed in any part of the Western world.....

What also makes the situation so frightening is that most of the proprietors who operate these groups share a common social background and in political terms share a common point of view.....

Divestment must occur. In future, newspaper groupings should not be permitted to take over other groupings with holdings in radio and television. Nor should newspaper groupings be

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permitted to acquire any new radio and television licences. This Bill deals with those problems. Its carriage into law could be accompanied by an orderly program of divestment of the major groupings that would ensure that dislocation does not occur.

Treasurer Paul Keating, second reading speech on B&T Amendment Bill No.2 1986, quoted in CU 20, Nov 1986.

The cross media ownership rule implies a more progressive approach to media monopolies in Australia on the part of the Hawke Government than the rule will ever deliver. It is being promoted as an excuse for lifting the lid to quite dizzy heights on the limits on ownership within any one medium, such as television. The policy rationale as to why it is so democratically healthy to allow control of the press to fall into the hands of only two companies, or control of television to fall into the hands of only four companies, has not yet been explained. One can only await the policy explanation with heightened political cynicism.

CU 20, Nov 1986

...AND THE AFTER-MATH

While the battle against Murdoch's takeover of the Herald and Weekly Times was being lost in the ABT, efforts were being made to open a second front under the Trade Practices Act. This too has now come to nought, removing the final barrier to the takeover.....

It is not only the extent of Murdoch's print interests which is an issue of concern, but how he may operate them. It is already a well established practice in the News Group for material to be syndicated amongst newspapers. It is safe to assume that the same practice will be

applied to the greater number of papers now owned by Murdoch. The inevitable result is a lessening of the diversity of news, information and political commentary in our newspapers.

CU 22, March 1987

June 1987 will be remembered for the shoddy spectacle of the media barons and the Labor Government negotiating a series of deals with conservative senators to ensure the passage of the new TV ownership and equalisation legislation.

CU 25, June 1987

In the last 10 months Melbourne commercial station HSV 7 has experienced three different owners: the Herald and Weekly Times under Murdoch control, Fairfax and, most recently, Christopher Skase's Universal Telecasters.

CU 27, August 1987

Many new legal and policy issues arise out of this latest round of ownership changes. Perhaps the message will sink in at last that it is folly to go on allowing publicly awarded licences to be traded freely as private property, with little or no regard for public interest or benefit. The notion of television licences as 'public trusts' has been substantially undermined.

Ibid



CU 37, August 1988

There is to be a re-examination of the nature, responsibilities and methods of regulatory agencies. 'While we need appropriate transparency and accountability in important regulatory decision-making, we also need to find ways to streamline procedures so that regulatory processes provide opportunities for community involvement and do not unduly impede commercial arrangements'.

Communications Minister Ralph Willis, quoted in CU 50, Nov 89.

RALPH'S CRYSTAL BALL

The Minister [Ralph Willis] did not believe that a significant freeing up of frequencies was any guarantee of an increase in [radio] programming diversity, and said that within a short time, stations might be driven by economic realities to switch to proven if unadventurous formats.

CU 48, September 1989

SIGNS OF THINGS TO COME....

Mike Hutchinson, first assistant secretary Telecommunications Policy, told the Monash seminar it was important to begin to 'rein in the concept' of cross-subsidy.

'A monopolist owned by government has a tendency to regard everything it does that loses money as being a social obligation', he asserted....

'I think the difference between social cross-subsidy and commercial price equalisation needs to be distilled in our thinking'.