



How AIM missed its target

by **John Lombard**, former chief presenter of The News Channel (now defunct).

I am very angry, disappointed and frustrated that Australian Information Media (AIM) has collapsed, particularly The News Channel (TNC) where I was to be the chief presenter of the evening news bulletin.

Angry with the Federal Government for mismanaging the whole pay TV policy; angry with the ABC for not giving TNC the support it deserved; and angry, disappointed and frustrated with AIM management for not nailing down a non-exclusive deal to distribute TNC before hiring 109 'poor bastards' (Philip Adams' description) who were sacked on October 6 when no satellite distribution could be secured.

After a 13-year career with the ABC in Canberra, Singapore, Moscow, and for three years as anchor on World at Noon, I was excited by the prospect of working at TNC.

Kim Williams, the AIM CEO, was an enthusiastic proselyte for the state-of-the-art non-linear system being installed. For 12 months, he entreated me to be one of the the main TNC presenters. David Hill, then ABC managing director, was no less excited with the venture and urged me to make the move. So did Paddy Conroy, then director of ABC TV and Chris Anderson, then managing editor of ABC news and current affairs.

All true and passionate believers in the concept we were developing in establishing Australia's first 24-hour news service. Where are they now? Certainly not at the AIM barricade.

At the insistence of ABC management, I resigned. On March 28 this year, I accepted an offer of employment at AIM, writing that I thought TNC 'the most exciting development in television in 20 years.'

And it was. The 109 staff were a

mixture of hardened journalistic experience and the exuberance of young educated newcomers to the industry. The news room hummed with a keenness so sadly missing in the ABC. In less than two months, we worked up a product of excellence. It wasn't always seamless television, but it was exciting, it was up-to-date, it was 'live' television. It had a splendid mix of national and international news (much of it scripted, voiced and edited by TNC's own staff, some of it shot by TNC cameras). It gave a more comprehensive, more diverse coverage of finance, sport, entertainment and everyday happenings right across Australia as well as the usual fare of federal and state politics than either the ABC or any of the commercial networks.

It was outward looking. It eschewed petty parochialism. It aimed to make the news of the day as interesting to the people of Meekatharra as to the citizens of Melbourne. And it was presented in a lively authoritative style.

In short, TNC was a contemporary all-Australian product that looked and sounded pretty damn good. Too good perhaps. It was clearly regarded as a threat to the free-to-air news services on 7, 9, 10 and the ABC because our 24-hour television news allowed viewers to choose when *they* wanted to watch rather than having it imposed on them at fixed times. Much of it was news 'live' as it happened. And because news was our only product, we were able to spend more time to analyse and background the issues without worrying about the next game show.

Now, Kerry Packer and Rupert Murdoch have decided to set up a cheap 24-hour news service that will have less than 20 per cent Australian

content. A sad pathetic sop to the need to have some sort of news programming on their pay TV channels.

So, where to now? What can be done to rescue this shambles? My plea - the ABC should take over The News Channel (dissolve the Fairfax/Cox Communications partnership) and run a 24-hour fully-digitised free-to-air TV news service across Australia using a second channel.

The Federal Government should provide the channel and maybe some seed finance to set it up.

We should use the considerable resources of the ABC news rooms, journalists, producers, camera crews, helicopters, news gathering equipment, here and overseas. And we should put to air a 24-hour service of national and international news, finance, sport, science, entertainment and weather.

In addition, each State would produce its own half-hour of local news, politics, sport etc, to run on the second channel at the traditional 7pm. But the rest of the programming would come out of Sydney using the TNC studio and the non-linear technology installed for TNC.

We would produce a commercial-free round-the-clock cost-effective television news second to none in the world. The productivity gains would be enormous. The infrastructure is already there, so are the people. Isolating the news (and maybe some current affairs programs like Lateline and the 7.30 Report) would free up the existing ABC channel to expand the programming of drama, documentaries, features, and sport.

Aiming at the stars? Maybe. But believe me, from my experience with TNC, I have seen the future of television news in Australia.

It's exciting and it works. □