



# Fewer Network Owners

**Ownership of the commercial radio industry in Australia is becoming increasingly concentrated, with the large networks setting out to acquire their rivals.**

In 1994, the two largest networks, Village Roadshow and Austereo Ltd merged leaving Village in control of the licences of all 12 metropolitan stations in the vastly expanded group. While the group will have to divest itself of one of its Melbourne stations in accordance with the rule preventing ownership of more than two stations in a market, it is well placed to reap the benefits of complementary music formats, greatly increased audience reach and reduced administration.

The economic benefits of larger networks were obviously not lost on Tony O'Reilly's Australian Provincial Newspapers which in 1994 purchased Wesgo Ltd, the second largest network behind Austereo Ltd. Wesgo consisted of five metropolitan stations and three regionals.

This move raised speculation about the reaction of the next largest network, The Australian Broadcasting Company, owned for three generations by the Albert Family. The network of four metropolitan and three regional stations had to compete with the newly expanded networks, or sell. On 3 March 1995 the Alberts sold their network to O'Reilly's Australian Provincial Newspapers which boasts nine metropoli-

tan and six regional stations, but will also require divestment to bring it within the two stations to a market rule.

APN's 50 per cent partner in its expanding radio interests is large US radio operator, Clear Channel Communications. Unlike television and print, foreign ownership has not been a major feature of radio. In 1992 the restrictions on foreign ownership of radio were removed from broadcasting legislation.

The consequences for the profitability of the remaining smaller players (and after these acquisitions the rest of the players are a lot smaller) remains to be seen.

This trend towards increased concentration of ownership is not limited to metropolitan stations. One smaller player has been expanding its regional network for some time. Rural Press, owned by J.B. Fairfax has increased its network to 19 regional stations and is reported to be near completion for the purchase of a further three Queensland regionals to go to a total of 22.

As the largest publisher of rural newspapers and magazines, Rural Press's expansion in radio is another symptom of cross media links that are developing despite the Government's claim to support separation.

The radio industry's return to profitability appears to be accompanied by an aggressive expansion program, with the unfortunate result of further concentration in Australian radio in metropolitan and regional markets. □

## New Media and The Old

**Although more than 3.5 million Australians are aged 55 or over and make up almost 20 per cent of the population, they are often excluded from access to the information age.**

New research by the Communications Law Centre (CLC) in Melbourne is examining the potential impacts of the new media on the lives of older people.

The research project, which extends the CLC's previous work on information poverty, is based on concerns that because older people may lack the training and financial resources to use information technology, they may be marginalised from the information age.

While it is not accurate to say that people of 55 are old, they do represent the age group taking early retirement. Relatively high unemployment has increased the number of people in this age group not in paid employment.

The CLC has sought to identify the attitudes of older people to information technology and to gauge their needs in a number of ways. Researchers are visiting organizations representing older people, conducting phone interviews with interstate organizations and computer training providers, and conducting literature searches of national and international databases concerning the use of information technology by older people.

The research, which is being funded by the ANZ Trustees, is already finding cost to be a major barrier to older people's access to technological hardware and classes. The literature supports this view. More than 1.5 million Australians are older people who receive pensions which means they are on fixed incomes and tight budgets.

The CLC anticipates producing a discussion paper on the issue by mid-year.

Interested people are invited to contact either Bruce Shearer or Vic Marles on (03) 642 0282. □

