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Networking by Nick Herd. – Book Launch April 26, 2012.

When you read a book which deals with territory you know like this – territory with which I have been actively dealing professionally since 1983 - you inevitably come at it with a personal perspective or in the case of Nick's extraordinary study many perspectives. The personal perspective as a professional executive, that of regulatory issues and the myriad inquiries read about or directly experienced, commercial issues, the framework of the industry it describes and of course the countless personalities – some colourful, some disappointingly narrow and some who simply operated on another plain.

Reading *Networking* made me at times feel terribly old, as I have known so many of the key figures in the book—many of them in quite combative ways—over the last four decades. Len Mauger, Lyle McCabe, Rupert Murdoch, Kerry Packer, Bruce Gyngell, Gough Whitlam, Doug McClelland, Jim Oswin, Mark Armstrong, Jack Neary, Sam Chisholm, Ken Hall, Trevor Morling, Pat Edgar, Jim Spiegelman, Jack Valenti, Jock Blair, Neil Balnaves, Paul Keating, Reg Grundy and Hector Crawford, to mention just a few of the characters in this work. These were or are, all people I have known very well. I had reason to reflect on many of the television experiences—of a policy, production or social nature—with them; and too many more to enumerate here in reading *Networking*.

I also have known almost every institution or company referred to in this compact but very detailed book – the AFDC, AFC, AFTRS, EFF, ACA, ABT, ABCB, AOBP, ACCC and ATF to name but some of the numerous acronyms—of which there are so many there is a three-page glossary at the outset of the book.

The last acronym I mentioned—ATF—validated for me that Nick had done some serious work in understanding the evolution of the commercial landscape. This includes looking at the balance of power between regional television and commercial television through to what we have today with three national networks. I know because as a schoolboy I worked at ATF every school holidays from when I was 13 because my dad knew the general manager, Ron Marshall.

ATF—Australian Television Facilities—which is not in the glossary of acronyms but is in the book where it is accurately described as managing the print exchange for programs for the major regional stations. In reality it did much more and programmed whole blocks of programming for stations as disparate as FNQ in Cairns through to

STV in Mildura, GSW in Albany and TVT in Tasmania. I must have been a capable kid or Ron a foolish man but I got to do the television movie schedules and print management and tracking arrangements for ATF for about ten weeks a year through until 1969 when I finished high school.

But I digress to make a point. This is not so much a book about people or a recital of their personal exchanges and enmities, nor is it about a mindless recital of regulatory and commercial acronyms. The people and the acronyms are a backdrop to the larger matters with which it deals—the evolution of television from its first imaginings in Australia—as envisioned by wild innovators like Henry Sutton of Ballarat and the foresight of Stanley Bruce in describing it as part of the future in 1927. It continues through the actual first operational licences for commercial services in 1956 after the review processes by the early Broadcast Control Board in 1953 with the first Television Act. It follows the trail of the politics and the legislative and regulatory landscape through many subsequent licences being issued and policy initiatives taken to secure change and evolution.

Nick delineates those markets he sees as relevant in that evolution—the broadcast station market, the audience-commodity market and the local program-supply market. He describes the challenges, inherent instabilities and imbalances together with the power issues in those markets as the medium unfolded and evolved into the complex creature we all know today.

He notes the technology determinism that has characterised Australia through to the NBN with the government anointing a European standard in the 50's. It was the first of a vast array of similar decisions made since: some good most poor or even bad. Many quite unnecessary and even dangerous. He details the outcomes from the manner of technology provision ownership from the outset. He examines the challenge provided to enforce licence standards and the way in which this shaped the industry through to the digital licensing in the last decade or so. He details the equalisation actions for regional Australia that changed forever the commercial balance between the regions and the metropolitan markets and determined the trend to three national operational companies. Companies of very considerable size and influence in today's landscape which are well equipped for fresh challenges in a really diffuse and hugely competitive world. He also details the assistance and preferment that commercial television has enjoyed and continues to enjoy from politicians on both sides of the House. It really is in so many ways one of the last bastions of twentieth century industry assistance policy in its financial, legislative, regulatory and cold hard political accommodation.

However none of this chronicle is harsh or particularly personally judgmental. It is rather a clear recital of central elements in that process with an assessment as Nick Herd has analysed the actions and consequences in a fair-minded and relatively dispassionate way. It is worth reading.

Inevitably a writer of a book such as this is being very brave, as so many who read it will have differences with emphasis, issues and the identification of that which is central to understanding the evolution of the most powerful medium in human history before the advent of the internet. In a work that is aiming to capture the sweep of all that has happened over almost sixty intense and fascinatingly energetic years it isn't possible to cover everything. References to most things are there and it identifies territory for others to follow through on aspects of the story with their own studies.

One of those aspects on which too little published, or publicly promoted, work has been done is that on the evolution of Australian content and the rich diversity of creators and production entities we have today in comparison with the establishment period of television in the 1950's.

In the mid 1980's I devised a large celebration of a particularly important moment in the history of Australian television. It was to celebrate the publication of a small manifesto published a few years after television started here beseeching a devotion to Australian-produced work. It was a manifesto penned and published by Hector Crawford. Dear Hector posited the most spirited advocacy for Australian content on Australian commercial television as a minimum requirement for the issue of licences which were by then proving to be extraordinarily valuable, as Nick's book details with some care.

Hector had become a good friend whilst I was the chief executive at the Film Commission. I treasured my times with him and his reflections on his battle history in television, and before that in a very substantial radio career, which saw the export of over 20,000 hours of Australian radio drama.

Hector Crawford, like Charles Chauvel before him, was one of the grand pioneers and amazing optimists. The creative studio which he ran in Melbourne was responsible for producing a diverse range of dramas which projected a view of our society and its ways which permeated the sense of national self and purpose. This at a time when Australia was still shedding its almost exclusively UK-centric view of the world.

Hector's advocacy for Australian content regulation with others was progressively ever more successful. What had been a rather constrained regulatory body gradually changed in response to a more engaged political view as to national policy priorities from the late 60's. This coincided with the establishment of the Australian Film Television and Radio School and later the Australian Film Development Corporation which was succeeded by the Australian Film Commission and in the 1980's saw the establishment of the Film Finance Corporation. I would offer the personal opinion that those actions culminated in a situation today where Australian content is central to competitive effectiveness and audience devotion for commercial television equally.

Essentially this book has several themes—interconnected stories. First is the medium itself, then the political and regulatory overlay. There follows the metropolitan market operators and their regional counterparts and the process of their progressive and inevitable intersection. Finally there is the story of content and its relationship to the whole and the changes as the medium has evolved commercially.

At the core is the essential story of four commercial forces—the three metropolitan networks and their regional peers who have been progressively subjugated. Nick makes many comments in this substantial work as to relative policy efficacy as it was manifested through legislation, regulation and commercial action. He recalls much of the colourful history and polarities. I am pleased to say it is not a polemical work, which would be inappropriate in this type of study.

In a way I could not avoid he doesn't indulge comments on the spectacular continuing largesse afforded the networks and the regional operators whether in providing financial assistance, regulatory preferment or legislated protection by

governments of all persuasions to those operators right up to the present day. Perhaps he has left room for me to write that study in my dotage!

So if you are looking for colourful anecdotes about moguls this book is not for you. If you are looking for a recital of corridor gossip it misses the mark also. It never ventures into disdainful or derogatory remarks about individuals or processes, preferring to maintain a disciplined and careful perspective on an at times remarkably complex subject. It is a very good read and reflects a caring scholar at work. I found it a study which gives a balanced exposition of policy and commercial outcomes in a clear-eyed way whilst reflecting a personal take on matters with observations which are always interesting and at times surprising.

Currency House is to be commended for taking the risk and having the conviction to publish it. It has of course been supported in that endeavour by many media-minded citizens who care about a healthy debate informed from public study. All power to them—they won't be disappointed. One hopes it will stimulate more confident works on a variety of matters which examine the media as a central element in the development and reflection of contemporary Australian society.

Kim Williams, 26 April 2012