



Steady hand on the tiller

General manager Ray Wardrop grew up watching Fat Cat, never dreaming that one day he'd be in charge of the station — and facing a dramatically different television world.

He wasn't born until a year after TVW's first pictures went to air and so the station's general manager, Ray Wardrop, lives in a very different television world. The men who previously occupied his chair oversaw the birth of the medium and steered it through the many changes in technology that have happened in 50 years.

It is his task to keep the ship steady as it enters more uncharted waters.

Time-shifting of viewing, fast-tracking of overseas programs, interactive TV, downloading and recording technology that will allow viewers to register their favourite programs or subjects to be recorded automatically — all are here, or nearly here.

"I think this is a very exciting time to be in television," he says. "It is changing all the time. Who knows what the next piece of technology will be?"

"This year we've seen the biggest change in television since it started in WA 50 years ago. The arrival of colour was a huge change but the introduction of all the new digital stations will have far greater impact than anything that has gone before."

While TVW works hard at maintaining its local presence, the reality is that television these days is global. As part of their regular viewing, audiences expect to see the big programs from overseas and, increasingly, expect to see them far sooner than they once did, he says.

"The demographic for series like *Heroes*, for instance, is the one which will simply download from the internet rather than wait," he says. Such capability would have been within the realm of science fiction 50 years ago.

Television is also strongly national, with channels showing the same program at the same time, with the consequent

economies of scale and the ability to attract national advertisers. It is, obviously, a very different world from that occupied by Sir James Cruthers, Brian Treasure and Darcy Farrell.

The old days of "that's a good idea, we'll try it" are long gone, the result of networking and the centralising of television on the east coast. It isn't a stretch of intelligence to work out that Perth is unlikely to produce a stand-alone drama, for instance, without a network agreement.

But Mr Wardrop is just as determined as his predecessors to maintain Seven's presence in the community, firstly through the news and *Today Tonight* and also with *Telethon*, the Christmas Pageant, *Skyworks* and the Australia Day concert, locally made programs like *Home in WA*, *Fishing WA* and *Nuts and Bolts*, and contributions to network series like *The Great Outdoors* and *Beauty and the Geek*.

He's also delighted that so many of TVW's alumni have taken senior positions with the network. They include Tim Worner, Brad Lyons, Simon Reeve, Ann Sanders, John Rudd and Chris O'Mara.

The Seven Network has not yet revealed how it plans to use its digital channel but will do so later this year. Whatever is available, the viewer will be the winner.

"There is a vast amount of content available now," Mr Wardrop says. "That means opportunities for program-makers all over the world, including Perth."

For all its efficiency, television can still have its difficult moments. The marriage between the AFL, the Seven

Network, Network 10 and Foxtel for broadcasting football is a case in point. It is a complicated deal which often requires compromise. And the timing of football matches also interferes with the holy grail of programming, news.

"We are loath to move the news for football," he says, bearing the battle scars of many a skirmish with furious viewers who thought he should do just that. But if he does, the news viewers are the furious ones.

The other besetting problem — and one which technology cannot overcome — is the two-hour delay (now a three-hour delay, with WA's rejection of daylight saving over summer). Anyone with a computer can find out who has won the Brownlow Medal or been victorious in *Dancing with the Stars* before the program is shown in Perth.

But to show such programs live would mean they would be on air when fewer people could watch. A dilemma, and no closer to being solved.

He will have another exciting project to oversee, too — the move from TVW's only home in Tuart Hill. A series of proposals for use of the land as housing is before the City of Stirling and he expects that in a couple of years the station will be looking for a new home.

It will be a smaller, more compact dwelling, probably in the city, in keeping with the needs of a modern operation and a far smaller number of staff.

Mr Wardrop, a born-and-bred West Australian, grew up a fan of Sandy Baker, Fat Cat and Percy. Jeff Newman was a familiar part of his television scene. He never imagined that one day he'd be in charge of the station.

"And I could never have imagined," he says, "that when Jeff Newman retired, I would be the one delivering the farewell speech." 7

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