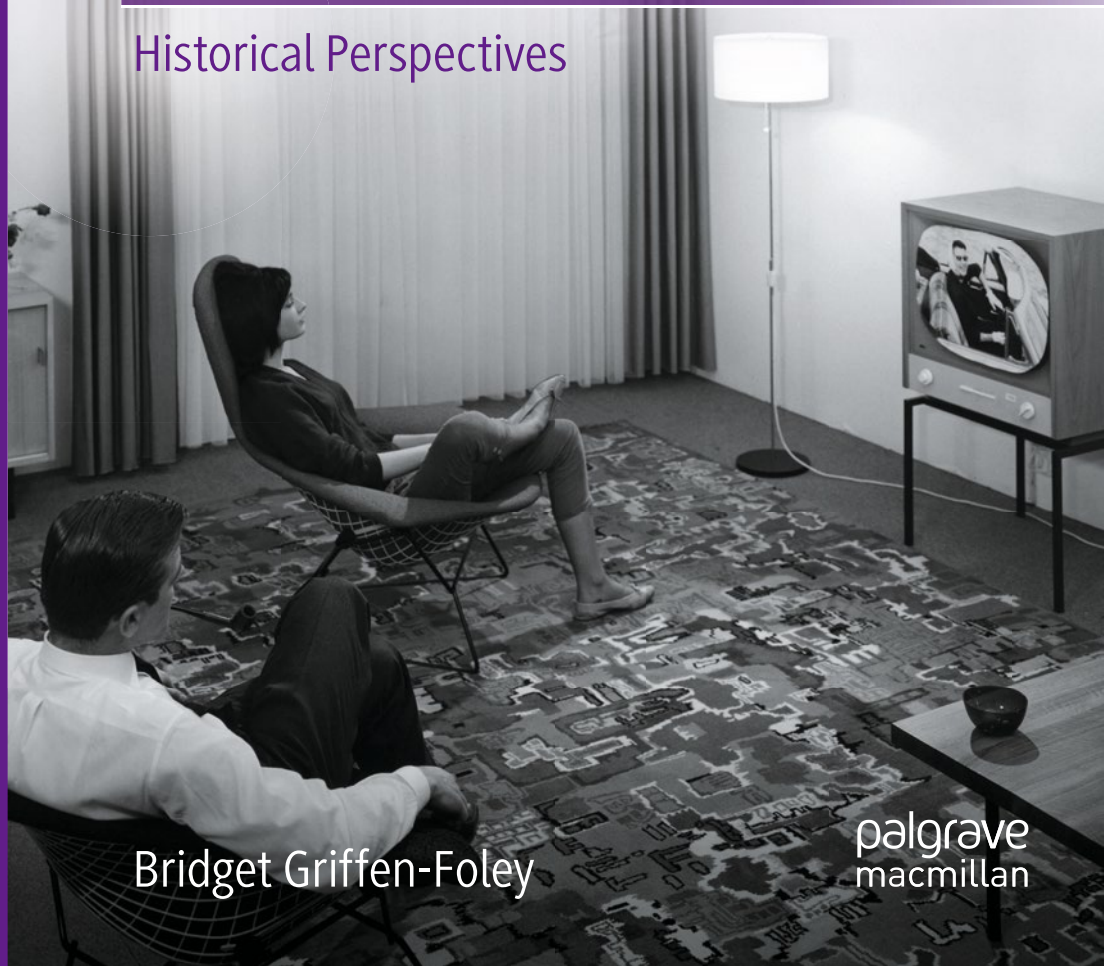




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Australian Radio Listeners and Television Viewers

Historical Perspectives



Bridget Griffen-Foley

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A NOTE ON AUSTRALIAN CALLSIGNS

Radio callsigns feature a numerical prefix indicating the state or territory in which the station is located: 2 (New South Wales and Australian Capital Territory), 3 (Victoria), 4 (Queensland), 5 (South Australia), 6 (Western Australia), 7 (Tasmania) and 8 (Northern Territory).

The first two letters of television callsigns are selected by the licensee, and the third letter indicates the state or territory in which the station is located: N (New South Wales), V (Victoria), Q (Queensland), S (South Australia), W (Western Australia), C (Australian Capital Territory) and D (Darwin, Northern Territory).

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ABBREVIATIONS

ABC	Australian Broadcasting Commission/Corporation
ABT	Australian Broadcasting Tribunal
AWA	Amalgamated Wireless Australasia Ltd
BAPH	Brisbane, Adelaide, Perth and Hobart
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
DoI	Department of Information
FARB	Federation of Australian Radio Broadcasters
<i>IMT</i>	<i>In Melbourne Tonight</i>
NSW	New South Wales
PMG	Postmaster-General
PSCB	Parliamentary Standing Committee on Broadcasting
SBS	Special Broadcasting Service
YWCA	Young Women's Christian Association
WA	Western Australia(n)

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Abstract This introductory chapter outlines the book’s focus on how Australians have consumed and engaged with radio and television—public (Australian Broadcasting Commission) and commercial—since the 1920s. It explains the book’s approach, which is to present a series of historical ‘perspectives’ based on fine-grained empirical research across Australia. Each chapter recovers and explores some of the lived experiences of Australian radio listeners and television viewers. The introduction also briefly summarises some key approaches to the study and history of media and broadcast audiences.

Keywords Media audiences • Radio • Television • Broadcasting • Australia

Australian Radio Listeners and Television Viewers: Historical Perspectives is about how Australian audiences have consumed and engaged with broadcast media over the last century. It considers radio since the 1920s and television since the 1950s, covering both public (Australian Broadcasting Commission) and commercial broadcasters. Moving away from a traditional focus on what the media has produced by way of texts and images, this book explores how radio and television content has been received, debated and engaged with, as well as the off-air role of radio and television stations and programs in the lives of Australian listeners and viewers.

This book presents ‘perspectives’ on the topic, recovering and exploring some of the lived experiences of Australian broadcast audiences. The six chapters are based on a diverse range of primary sources from around Australia, many used here for the first time, including fan mail, complaints files, regulatory records, the private archives of radio clubs and the agendas and minutes of ABC Advisory Committees.

Chapter 2 explores the dynamic world for children created by the on-air and extracurricular endeavours of commercial stations and the ABC (including its famous Argonauts Club) in the years before World War II. Chapter 3 examines the emergence of other radio clubs—particularly attached to commercial stations—across Australia, and moves on to the role of television clubs. Chapter 4 intercepts some of the fan mail received by the ABC and commercial broadcasting stations and networks. Chapter 5, which is closely related to Chap. 4, is based on complaints received by radio and television broadcasters, as well as the Australian Broadcasting Control Board (1949–77), responsible mainly for the commercial sector. Chapter 6 turns its focus back to the ABC, tracing the role of the public service broadcaster’s Advisory Committees before uncovering the operations of its state-based Television Viewers’ Committees between 1959 and 1965. Chapter 7 considers programs about romance and dating since the 1930s, paying particular attention to participants and audience involvement in two creations of the 1980s: *Midnight Matchmaker* on Sydney radio and *Perfect Match* on network television.

In *The Practice of Everyday Life* in 1980, sociologist Michel de Certeau examined the ways in which people altered and individualised forms of mass culture in order to make them their own.¹ Scholars increasingly challenged the view, drawn largely from the ‘effects tradition’, that media consumers were passive, teasing out notions of the passive and the private, the active and the public.² By the mid-1990s scholars, including Australians Virginia Nightingale and Elizabeth Jacka, were comparing differing approaches to audience research in the social sciences.³ Barrie Gunter and David Machin edited a four-volume work on media audiences, displaying the diversity of theoretical and methodological approaches to history, measurement and effects, in 2009.⁴ This was followed by Nightingale’s *The Handbook of Media Audiences*.⁵

There was an increasing realisation, as Richard Butsch put it, that ‘[p]opular and scholarly discussions of audiences have long lacked historical context’.⁶ As Sonia Livingstone remarked, ‘it is all too easy to make the

ahistorical assumption that present theory and findings apply equally well to past or future periods'.⁷

My book seeks to uncover and explore some of the traces of the 'temporary communities'⁸ formed by Australian broadcast audiences and broadcasting institutions themselves. It is informed by major historical studies over the last 30 years including American work on audiences for entertainment and radio⁹; essays in Michele Hilmes and Jason Loviglio's *Radio Reader*¹⁰; Kate Lacey's study of listening as a cultural practice;¹¹ and Paddy Scannell's exploration of the communicative experience in modern life.¹² It also builds on Australian studies including Kate Darian-Smith and Sue Turnbull's edited collection, *Remembering Television*¹³; Mark Balnaves, Tom O'Regan and Ben Goldsmith's book on audience measurement¹⁴; Michelle Arrow's studies of listeners to *Blue Hills*;¹⁵ and work on *Perfect Match* by cultural studies scholars.¹⁶

It would be difficult, if not impossible, to write the definitive history of Australian broadcast audiences given the challenges of finding systematic sources created by, and about, listeners and viewers, and the multiplicity of individual experiences. Based on fine-grained empirical research, this book is instead a series of perspectives on aspects of the broadcasting experience.

NOTES

1. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).
2. Richard Butsch, *The Making of American Audiences: From Stage to Television, 1750–1990* (New York: Cambridge University Press, New York, 2000), pp. 3, 7–8; Sue Turnbull, 'Imagining the audience', in Stuart Cunningham and Sue Turnbull (eds.), *Media and Communication in Australia* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2014), pp. 68–69.
3. For example, Virginia Nightingale, *Studying Audiences: The Shock of the Real* (London: Routledge, 1996); Elizabeth Jacka, 'Researching audiences: A dialogue between cultural studies and social science', *Media International Australia*, (73) (August 1994), pp. 45–51.
4. Barrie Gunter & David Machin (eds.), *Media Audiences*, vol. 1, *History of Audience Study*; vol. 2, *Measurement of Audiences*; vol. 3, *Aggregated and Disaggregated Audiences*; vol. 4, *Audiences and Influences*, (London: SAGE, 2009).
5. Virginia Nightingale, *The Handbook of Media Audiences* (Chichester, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).
6. Butsch (2000, p. 2).

7. Sonia Livingstone et al., 'Audiences for crime media 1946–91: A historical approach to reception studies', *Communication Review*, 4(2) (2001), p. 166.
8. Melvyn Stokes and Richard Maltby (eds.), *American Media Audiences: From the Turn of the Century to the Early Sound Era* (London: BFI, 1999), p. 9.
9. Butsch 2000; Ray Barfield, *Listening to Radio, 1920–1950* (Westport, C.T., Praeger, 1996); Elena Razlogova, *The Listener's Voice: Early Radio and the American Republic* (Philadelphia, P.A.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).
10. Michele Hilmes & Jason Loviglio (eds.), *Radio Reader: Essays in the Cultural History of Radio* (London: Routledge, 2002).
11. Kate Lacey, *Listening Publics: The Politics and Experience of Listening in the Media Age* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013).
12. Paddy Scannell, *Radio, Television and Modern Life: A Phenomenological Approach* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996); Jacka 1994, pp. 35–36.
13. Kate Darian-Smith and Sue Turnbull (eds.), *Remembering Television: Histories, Technologies, Memories* (Newcastle upon Tyne, U.K.: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011).
14. Mark Balnaves, Tom O'Regan and Ben Goldsmith, *Rating the Audience: The Business of Media* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011).
15. Michelle Arrow, "Good entertainment & good family life": Listener readings and responses to Gwen Meredith's *The Lawsons* and *Blue Hills*, *Journal of Australian Studies*, 22(58) (1998), pp. 38–47 and "The most sickening piece of snobbery I have ever heard": Race, radio listening, and the "Aboriginal question" in *Blue Hills*, *Australian Historical Studies*, 38(130) (2007), pp. 244–60.
16. Some of this work was published in *Australian Journal of Cultural Studies*, 4(2) (May 1987).

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CHAPTER 2

Aunts, Uncles and Argonauts

Abstract This chapter considers the emergence and role of radio ‘Aunts’ and ‘Uncles’ in cities and towns across Australia as the industry worked to foster a sense of intimacy and engagement and build communities of young listeners. It explores the dynamic world for children created by the on-air and extracurricular endeavours of commercial stations and the Australian Broadcasting Commission in the years before World War II. The chapter examines the launch of the ABC’s ambitious Argonauts Club, which grew to be one of the biggest and most successful children’s radio clubs in the world.

Keywords Broadcasting • Children’s radio • Commercial radio • Australian Broadcasting Commission • Argonauts

Beginning with the ‘Aunts’ and ‘Uncles’ that appeared on radio stations around Australia in the second half of the 1920s, this chapter considers how an impersonal mass medium sought to foster intimacy and create communities of young Australian listeners in the years before World War II. Australia’s radio industry consisted of ‘A-class’ (public service) stations, which were consolidated into the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) in 1932, and B-class (commercial) stations. Both sectors created specific sound worlds for young listeners, and generated on-air and extra-curricular activities through membership certificates, birthday calls, film

screenings, parties and excursions. The chapter examines the first incarnation of the ABC's Argonauts Club (1933–1935), concluding with its relaunch in 1941.

In the 1920s, for many listeners the great fascination of wireless lay in outside broadcasting, in the bringing of the wider world into the privacy and comfort of the home. But, as the broadcasting historian Lesley Johnson shows, by the end of the decade, Australian industry leaders and periodicals were convinced that radio was most successful when intimate, human and personal.¹

The radio 'Uncle' and 'Aunt' were a feature of Australia's A- and B-class stations by the mid-1920s. One of the earliest was simply styled 'Uncle Radio', who was heard on 5CL Adelaide from 1924 to 1928.² This A-class station inaugurated the Twinklers' Boys Club, as an adjunct to the Scouting movement, in 1926. Enjoying vice-regal patronage, it was one of the earliest children's radio clubs in Australia³ and was followed by the 5CL Bluebird Girls' Club.⁴

Sydney's *Wireless Weekly* reported in 1926 on the surreptitious visits of parents to radio offices, dropping in little gifts that Uncles and Aunts could send 'over the air' to children. 'Uncle George' (George Saunders) of A-class station 2BL was said to be amused by the letters he received, including one from a girl saying that although she knew that he was an old man (he was aged in his 30s), she hoped he would be spared to tell bedtime stories for many years to come.⁵

Queensland Radio News photographed the 'bright and cheery' 'Uncle Ben', who appeared on 4QG's Saturday evening bedtime story session, alongside a 'vivacious little lady' assistant, 'Miss Mabel Sunshine' (teenage elocution student Mabel Cormac). The periodical dedicated a regular page to 'Uncle Ben's Corner', relaying behind-the-scenes news, encouraging children to write in, conducting competitions, and publishing photos of children listening to the Brisbane A-class station.⁶ The man behind Uncle Ben, printer Leonard L. Read, also produced a book of verses sung on his program, and *Uncle Ben's Book-o'-Fun* for boys and girls.⁷ By December 1926 there were several 'Bed-time Storytellers' on 4QG in addition to Uncle Ben and Mabel (now known as 'Little Miss Sunshine').⁸

Several radio Uncles were also heard presenting programs for adults. A former army officer, J.M. Prentice, delivered lectures over 2BL, in addition to reading bedtime stories as 'Uncle Jack' and engaging in staged quarrels with 'Uncle George'.⁹ 2SM's 'Uncle Tom' (John Dunne), 2UE's 'Uncle Lionel' (Lionel Lunn) and 'Uncle Bob' (Russell A. Yeldon) on