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The Prelude to Television in Australia

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Bio

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Abstract

Whilst many media historians have examined television’s prehistory in Britain and the United States. Literature examining the history of television in Australia, prior to the 1956 inauguration, is far less developed. Much of the literature on Australian television history begins at 1956 and disregards the compelling prelude to television. As evident within this article, there is still a gap in the literature associated with the history of television in Australia. This article makes evident that Australia’s association and awareness of television dates back well before 1956. The article explores two areas associated with the prehistory of Australian television, the representation of television in the Australian newspapers and public awareness. It will draw attention to the early public discussions, particularly in the press, which influenced Australians’ perception of television prior to its official inauguration during 1956.

Key words

Television, Australian Television, Media History, Australian Television History, Television prehistory

The Prelude to Television in Australia

On 16th September 1956 Sydney station, TCN-9, commenced the first official Australian television broadcast. This date is referred to by Australian television history literature, as the commencement of television in Australia. By stating 1956 as the year television was introduced in Australia, it ignores the prehistory of Australian television. This article will argue that the use of 1956 in association with the introduction of television in Australia is misleading and not a true reflection of Australia's association and involvement with television. It will provide evidence of Australia's long involvement with television and bring to the surface some of the key developments prior to 1956. This article makes it evident that there is a rich prehistory of Australian television, that should be further explored and discussed within Australian television history literature.

Australian Television's forgotten prehistory

Many media historians have examined television's prehistory in Britain and the United States, including Erik Barnouw; Asa Briggs; Russel Burns; David Fisher and Marshall Fisher; John MacDonald and Burton Paulu.¹ However literature examining the history of television in Australia is far less developed, even though this country's association with the small screen dates back to the 1890's. Many Australian media history publications focus on developments subsequent to 1956, including publications by Peter Beilby, Stuart Cunningham, Brendan Horgan, Elizabeth Jacka, Sue Turnbull and Graeme Turner.² A small number of publications by Julie Bailey, Ann Curthoys, Cameron Hazlehurst, Nick Herd, Albert Moran, and Sue Turnbull and Kate Darian-Smith have discussed early Australian television in the years leading up to 1956.³ However, As will be shown by this article, the research is extremely limited and there is immense scope for this area to be further explored.

Cunningham approaches the introduction of television in Australia by breaking it into four phases.⁴ The first phase discusses events from 1956 to 1963, although it does include the innovation of television during the 1940s and the diffusion of television in Australia during the 1950s. The second phase, from 1964 to 1975, is defined by Cunningham as the establishment of television in Australia. Phase three, from 1975 to

1987, represents the maturation of television, and the fourth phase, 1987 to the author's time of writing in the early 1990s, is defined as the decline or specialisation of television in Australia. In his article, 'History, contexts, politics, policy', Cunningham employs a similar business cycle approach, 'that moves from the innovation and diffusion of a new technology, to its establishment and system growth as a communication industry'.⁵ While Cunningham does discuss Australian television's prehistory, it is only its immediate prehistory in the late 1940s. He reserves his main discussion for events post-1956.

A similar approach to Cunningham's can be seen by contributors to the influential collection *The Media & Communications in Australia*, first published in 2002. In the first edition, Terry Flew breaks the introduction of television to Australia into three sections: 1956 to 1970; the 1970s and 80s; and the 1990s, which includes a discussion of free-to-air television.⁶ In the second edition, Flew and Callum Gilmour also see the development of television in terms of chronological phases, as do Flew and Stephen Harrington in the third edition⁷. In the fourth edition, Harrington describes the development of television under the following sub-headings: 'Pre-1975: establishment'; '1975-86: a maturing medium'; '1987-2005: specialising', '2006-present: the multi-channel era'.⁸ All the above writers regard the history of television in Australia as beginning in 1956.

As noted by Herd, 'our popular memory, or at least our popular history, tells us that Australians did not watch TV until the 1950s'.⁹ However, the contention of this article is that the history of Australian television began well before 1956. Moran argues that writing of Australian television's prehistory should date back to as early as the 1920s, which he refers to as the 'stage of preparation or gestation'.¹⁰ Indubitably, Australia's television history has much greater depth than is suggested by many writers.

As noted by Curthoys, ‘research into the history of television in Australia is undeveloped, in contrast to the history of film and radio’.¹¹ Furthermore, Jacka adds that this lack of historical discussion exists despite, television having ‘a much more potent influence on Australian life than Australian cinema’.¹² While Bailey does discuss television prior to 1956, her focus is on early radio and its influence on the dual system, as well as the debates associated with early television policy from 1942.¹³ Bailey maintains that ‘the history of Australian television must inevitably be that of government policy and legislation’. Curthoys also focuses on the Australian political television policy debate.¹⁴ She discusses the ‘serious government attention’ that began in the early 1940s, while noting that ‘there had been specialist enthusiasts for television in the late 1920s’.¹⁵ Despite the lack of discussion in Australian media history literature, the early discussions and experimentation associated television in Australia are evident in early articles within Australian newspapers.

Publicity and sponsorship

Australian newspapers influenced the general public’s awareness of television well before the official 1956 inauguration. There is also evidence that the radio industry used the Australian press to deter the public from television, and specific examples are discussed later in this article. One of the first articles associated with television to be published in an Australian newspaper was within *The Sydney Morning Herald* in March 1927, titled ‘Practical Television—Optimistic Forecast’.¹⁶ The article discussed a paper presented by Dr Ernst Alexanderson, consulting engineer for Radio Corporation of America (RCA) and General Electric (GE) in the United States. In the article Alexanderson argued that television was a ‘certainty in the near future’. He noted that:

In the matter of television we have to struggle with present imperfections in technique and with problems which are difficult, but may be solved at any time by one or more of the different experimenters now working on the practical adaption of radio photography to television.¹⁷

Alexanderson's statement highlights the differing of opinions at the time, on whether television was associated with motion pictures or with radio. In addition, Alexanderson noted the limit of the wave length as an important technical issue which needed to be resolved. Because of Australia's dispersed population, this would be a critical issue if television was to be introduced. Local technology would need to reach the scattered Australian population and consequently substantial funding would be required to establish a far-reaching television broadcast network. This was not as an important issue for Britain and the United States that both had denser population comparatively to Australia.

John Logie Baird's work in Britain was reported during June 1927 in *The Sydney Morning Herald*. It was argued that Baird was the 'inventor of the world's best television apparatus to date', which was also 'candidly admitted by American experts'.¹⁸ The United States also had key inventors working on the television, Charles Francis Jenkins, Philo Farnsworth and Vladimir Zworykin the three commonly discussed in association with the historical developments of television in the United States. Baird's latest demonstration of his Noctovision had revealed the possibilities of using ultra-violet light with the subject in complete darkness. While this was simply an attempt to improve the current television technology, the potential use of the technology in warfare was also raised. A. Dinsdale, an American expert with *Radio News*, was cited in the *The Sydney Morning Herald* article arguing that the technology could be an important tool in warfare, 'for it renders it possible to follow the movements of the

enemy when he believes himself to be under the cover of darkness’.

By August 1927, the Australian press had publicised the views of Hungarian inventor Denes von Mihaly. He claimed that his television invention could be used with ordinary telephoning and would allow for ‘people to see cinema plays, tennis matches, and boxing contest’.¹⁹ According to Mihaly, his invention would cost approximately £20, which the paper said demanded ‘careful analysis by people concerned with the proper development of wireless’.²⁰ While there had been preliminary demonstrations across the United States and Europe, there had been no evidence provided as to ‘how the system could be applied with reasonable simplicity and economy to the general public’. It was noted that ‘suspicion or scepticism’ can soon give way to the enthusiasm for a new technology on the part of the public.²¹ That year, Australia’s prime minister, Stanley Bruce, noted that: ‘It is expected the people of Australia, if experiments in television are successful, will be able to view events taking place in London’.²² This was a statement that appeared to show positive support by the government for the new medium, although stopped short of giving any impression for supporting local manufacturers to commence developments in the area of television.

Whilst there had been numerous demonstration of television in Britain and the United States, both countries had not commenced television broadcasts. In July 1928 Jenkins had been granted the first television license in the United States, by the Federal Radio Commission (FRC). The broadcast commenced on W3XK, located in Washington DC. Limited to the 10kHz bandwidth which limited the images to silhouettes.²³ In Britain, Baird continued to undertake public demonstrations to gain support to commence television broadcasts, but he was unable to gain the support of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) until 1929 to commence trial television broadcasts.

Tension between the Australian government and local manufactures mounted due to the lack of government support for local developments in television as to those that were occurring abroad in Britain and the United States. This was made evident in the industry journal *Radiovision*, a monthly journal by Television and Radio Laboratories Limited which commenced publication in September 1928. The journal discussed early television developments from an industry and manufactures perspective, different from the Australian press, which focused on the social perspective. The journal's title, *Radiovision*, was described as the 'new art as applied to Broadcasting to be called by the old name – Television – or by the newer one – Radiovision'.²⁴ The journal claimed to be 'devoted to Television, particularly as applied to broadcasting'.²⁵ Although the journal was short lived with the final issue published in October 1929.

The use of the term radiovision by Television and Radio Laboratories Limited for its journal's title made evident the uncertainty as to what television was. The journal also argued that, 'radiovision is a variation on broadcasting rather than a new industry' and that 'we have no hesitation in expressing the confident opinion that within a year every broadcasting station will be a radiovision station, too'.²⁶ The journal focused on American developments throughout issues, consistently discussing the progress of a Jenkins in the United States, a key contributor to the development of television. However, the journal rarely mentioned Baird and his developments in Britain, only discussed once in the January 1929 edition.²⁷ This revealed the commercial orientation of the journal, reflective of practices in the United States as opposed to the public structure in Britain. Television and Radio Laboratories Limited wished to commercially exploit the local development of television as quickly as possible.

Television and Radio Laboratories Limited were not the only company experimenting in the field of television during this period. In 1928, A. Brown, general manager and director of Central Broadcasters Limited, announced his Australian-made television system for the reception of transmitted pictures. He argued that with this apparatus, 'South Australia will have the distinction of being the first state to have a regular radio picture transmission service'.²⁸ The apparatus differed from moving pictures experimentation in the United States and Britain, in that it could only receive the transmission of still photographs, although they could be in a variety of colours. This type of apparatus and its functionality was similar to that undertaken by Australian Inventor Henry Sutton many years earlier.

Sutton experimented with television in Australia prior to 1890, referred to at the time as *distant vision*. His work was an influence on television's development globally, particularly on Baird. Sutton noted his motivation for developing his telephane, arguably a television system, 'to be able to see here in Ballarat, by the aid of electricity, the race for the Melbourne Cup'.²⁹ During 1885, Sutton demonstrated his system successfully achieving his goal to transmit images of the Melbourne Cup to Ballarat.³⁰ His telephane used telegraph wires for sending and receiving images, which limited the amount of data, impacting image quality. By the time Central Broadcasters Limited began its trial television broadcasts, radio had been introduced. Radio established an alternative transmission method to telegraph wires, allowing for greater results of images.

Along with Central Broadcasters Limited, 3DB, a Melbourne radio broadcaster, also declared its interest in television. Tucker, one of the directors, had visited Britain and was aware of Baird's television system. The company had imported two

transmitting sets and obtained permission by the postal authorities to undertake experimental broadcasts.³¹ These experiments, as with those undertaken by Central Broadcasters Limited, consisted of the transmission of still pictures and photographs, with the objective ‘that country newspapers could receive pictures of current events’.³² Experimental television tests by 3DB were reported in newspapers across Australia during 1929, including *Examiner*, *The Richmond River Express* and *Casino Kyogle Advertiser* and *The Queenslander*, to name just a few.

The same year, it was declared that the ‘Commonwealth government would reserve to itself the right of television transmission when it became practical’.³³ Television and Radio Laboratories argued that there was ‘no reasonable excuse for the government to endeavour to create a monopoly’.³⁴ It was known that B-Class (commercial) radio stations had applied for licenses to broadcast still images.³⁵ Television and Radio Laboratories also announced that it had commenced television tests from 10 January, 1929. The pictures broadcast were 28-lines at sixteen frames per second.³⁶ In addition to these tests, Television and Radio Laboratories argued in *Radiovision* that, ‘it is safe to say that before the end of the coming winter radiovision will occupy a very important place in broadcasting’.³⁷ Television and Radio Laboratories warned the readers of *Radiovision* that:

So it is with radiovision. The change will come overnight and still further alterations in the plans of those who provide public amusement will have to be made. When radiovision comes, the fever will be even more widespread than with the “talkies” because the wireless audience exists everywhere.³⁸

The same year Australian-based companies began to experiment with the transmission

of images, international companies began to stage demonstrations in Australia. Baird International Limited was one of the first companies to demonstrate television in Australia; limited success in Britain had forced Baird into exploring international markets. The foreign director of the company, J. M. MacLulich, noted on the day of the demonstration that improvements had been made to the system in London. The new version, he continued, which would be available in a few months, would allow for multiple subjects to be shown on screen.³⁹

Baird was not present, but visited Australia almost ten years later for the 1938 World Radio Convention in Sydney. It was reported at the time that Baird brought with him over two tons of equipment, approximately £20,000 in value. Baird 'was hopeful of having a small television station erected in Australia, probably in Sydney'.⁴⁰ It was noted that 'the business connections between Australia and Great Britain would assure the public of Australia of participation in the latest developments'.⁴¹ However, nothing eventuated from Baird's demonstrations in Australia.

The connection between Britain and Australia was further strengthened with the successful transmission of television from England to Australia in 1932. The companies involved in the test included the Marconi Company and Amalgamated Wireless Australasia Limited (AWA). The transmission was of 'words and phrases typed out on a machine at the station at Chelmsford, England, which had simultaneously appeared on a screen in the Sydney office of the company'.⁴² Mr H. Dowaett, research manager of the Marconi Company, argued that Australia would, in the near future,

... find it necessary to decide how to employ television, what restrictions should be imposed, and in what way existing services might have to be modified to make room for it in the ether.⁴³

The tests were successful, but the imagery transmitted was in the form of black and white text messages. Existing equipment actually allowed the subject to sit directly in front of the camera, but the attempts made by the company to broadcast these types of pictures from England to Australia failed.⁴⁴

The hype around television in Australia began to intensify as further local demonstrations and reports were made of the progress in both the United States and Britain. Television was demonstrated at the Wireless Exhibition in Adelaide in 1931, although the specific details are unknown.⁴⁵ It is interesting to note that two years previously, the exhibition organising committee excluded television demonstrations and apparatus, stating that ‘such a display might mislead the public’.⁴⁶ As was pointed out in *Radiovision*, ‘such a statement is in itself probably more misleading than the actual display would have been’.⁴⁷

In 1933, Radiovision Australasia Limited also gave a demonstration of the principles of television. *The Horsham Times* proclaimed that, ‘this amazing new development, it is claimed, will make it possible for a man to smoke a pipe at his own fireside and watch the progress of a test match at Lords or Melbourne’.⁴⁸ *The Mail* published a large article, ‘Television wonders of the future’, which focused on the work of Baird and the developments in Britain.⁴⁹ The television development in Britain were also discussed in *The Advertiser* at the beginning of 1935. It reported that a British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) television service would commence by the end of the year.

The news that a television service had commenced in Britain escalated discussion about when Australia would also initiate a television service. A range of concerns about the new medium was raised in Australian newspapers. The articles were

less preoccupied with technical aspects than with social factors. The two concerns raised in *The Advertiser* were its novelty and the costs for Australians. The article stated that television, ‘while doubtless likely to prove highly diverting to the younger members of the average family, can hardly be expected to keep their elders continuously entertained, once the novelty has worn off’.⁵⁰ Costs were also discussed, based on figures available from Britain. Ten stations were needed to reach 50 per cent of the population of England at a cost of £180,000 each. Using equivalent figures, Australia would have required 660 stations to serve the population, and even if the services were restricted to the areas of denser population ‘the cost would still be colossal’.⁵¹

The *Sunday Mail* headed an article, ‘DON’T Get EXCITED About TELEVISION!’ This view on television was influenced by Australian radio stakeholders and the article was accompanied by large advertisements for radio receivers and radio programming. The article discussed perceived issues associated with the new medium and concluded that the introduction of television in Australia ‘will not be in 1936, nor 1937, nor—probably—1938’.⁵² While experimental broadcasts had been taking place in Australia for some time, television was still perceived as a novelty. The article suggested to the readers that ‘you may as well sit back and enjoy your sound receiver’ and wait for ‘the hundred and one problems that stand in the way of a successful and efficient popular television’.⁵³ Television was still regarded as being experimental, unlike the more established media form of radio, which was superior from both a technological and entertainment perspective.

Along with technical problems, the article also raised social issues, with the reporter questioning whether ‘the public [would] be able to concentrate its attention and

focus its eyes on the screen for any considerable period of time?'⁵⁴ Not only might there be issues with concentration, but television could also distract from social activities. As the article noted, 'when you look at a television picture, you will not be able to play bridge, as you do with sound reception'.⁵⁵ Clearly, the intention of the article was to move current social discussion from television back to radio, which itself had only been introduced to Australia a little more than ten years previously.

These negative views on television continued and were raised by a member of the general public almost ten years later. A Mr Wilson, who had witnessed television in both the United States and Britain, wrote a letter to the editor of *The Advertiser* (1944), in which he raised concerns about the way in which television had been discussed by the Australian press:

We in Australia were continually being told, particularly by one of the leading radio manufacturers, that television was only in the experimental stage. This propaganda was until the arrival in Australia from London of Mr Baird who publicly announced in 1941 that television was an established commercial proposition.⁵⁶

Wilson argued that radio manufacturers were fearful that the Australian public may prefer to purchase television receivers rather than radio receivers. While the radio industry appeared to be fearful of the impact of television, it appeared that the theatre community did not share the same view. One theatre producer, Mr Ritchard, believed that 'television will play a big part in increasing the popular appeal of the legitimate stage'.⁵⁷ He noted that the new medium could impact on motion pictures but would not harm theatre; in fact, it could provide theatre with 'more appeal than ever. People will still like to go out to the theatre'.⁵⁸ As Ritchard pointed out, theatre had survived 'four storms – the gramophone, silent films, radio, and talkies' and surely would also survive television.⁵⁹

Speculation of television's introduction in Australia

The speculation around television's introduction to Australia escalated in 1935 with news of the BBC's new television service, and continued until television was officially introduced to Australia in 1956. In 1935, the *Examiner* predicted that television would arrive in Australia within a few years. The representative of the British electrical and wireless manufacturing interests within Australia, a Mr Carter, believed that the main issue in England was which system to adopt, referring to an ongoing battle between Baird and Marconi-EMI to have their system adopted by the BBC. He surmised that Australia would eventually use the same system as Britain.⁶⁰

Some in the radio industry also contributed to the television debate. Mr Wyles, radio sales manager for Philips Lamps (Australasia), argued that 'television on a commercial basis may not be expected in Australia for at least 20 years'.⁶¹ He was shown a demonstration of television in Holland, which he noted 'was technically excellent', but argued there 'was no existing avenue for its practical application and commercial use'.⁶² Wyles also argued that 'the biggest limitation was lack of subjects to provide programs. Attempts to televise speakers or singers would be doomed to failure. Interest could not be sustained'.⁶³ While motion pictures had been used for content, Wyles argued this was 'inimical to the interests of the film industry'.⁶⁴

Australia's best-known radio authority, Sir Ernest Fisk, also stated his views on television. The sealed radio receivers in Australia 'were the brainchild' of Fisk.⁶⁵ Fisk had been influential in the establishment of radio in Australia and was the chairman of AWA, a leading radio manufacturer. Fisk was of the opinion that while television would be introduced to Australia within ten years, it was still 'not yet a practical

everyday utility'.⁶⁶ Fisk's comments about television contributed to the argument about the novelty of television in the earlier *Sunday Mail* article, 'DON'T Get EXCITED About TELEVISION!'.⁶⁷

He noted that there would be financial and technical issues that first needed to be resolved before television could be introduced in Australia. Fisk used the progression of radio as an example. He argued that worldwide short-wave radio broadcasts had been the subject of experimentation for ten years, but the technology 'was now coming into the public service stage'.⁶⁸ This view diverged from that put forward in *Radiovision* nine years previously, that 'the commercial possibility of radiovision has been the subject of much criticism, but despite the doubt of such pessimists RADIOVISION IS HERE'.⁶⁹ The journal continued to argue for development in the area of television and declared that 'Australia should not wait until Nations have progressed, but should take the lead in this field'.⁷⁰ The journal also argued that it was Australians' patriotic duty to embrace the new technology:

It should be the aim of all patriotic Australian citizens to encourage to the utmost Australian industry and development rather than to adopt the easier way of waiting until radiovision has been tried and proved in other countries. The latter is an apathetic and un-Australian attitude.⁷¹

The negative reporting of television in the Australian press was regularly criticised, particularly by local manufacturers. Television and Radio Laboratories dismissed the reports in the press as 'probably propaganda'.⁷² Despite these reports, in 1938 the British General Electric Company Propriety Limited stated that it would be importing sets and that demonstrations would be given at Australian capital cities from

October. The managing director, Edward Hirst, argued that ‘England undoubtedly leads the world in television and is the only country with regular transmission services’.⁷³ In June, the *Courier-Mail* published an article ‘Test players try television’.⁷⁴ The article contained limited text, but included a striking photograph of Australian cricketers, Stanley McCabe and William “Bill” O’Reilly, viewing a television set in their London hotel.

The close association between Britain and Australia was also emphasised in *The Mail* which gave opinions of BBC experts, who stated, ‘we spent £900,000 including experimentation and initial outlay’.⁷⁵ Australia would benefit by our experience and avoid much of our expenditure’.⁷⁶ These BBC experts also noted that their system had ‘been proved by the adoption of a modified form by France, Germany, and the United States’.⁷⁷ The British influence continued to be discussed in *The Argus*, which argued that ‘there were great possibilities for television in Australia at present, with English experts in enforced idleness’.⁷⁸ It was reported that the current range of a broadcast was 50 miles (80.5 kilometres), although there had been recordings of 150 miles (241 kilometres). As discussed previously, the achievable broadcast distance would be a critical consideration for television’s success in Australia. It was at this point the world’s attention would move toward World War II which had a major impact on television’s development global, particularly in Britain, where television broadcasts ceased at the beginning of the war for almost seven years.

Australians involved and aware of television prior to 1956

The Australian public were aware of television as early as 1927, well before the 1956 inauguration. Some local newspapers tried to sway the public against television. The

radio industry, in particular, expressed its concerns about the potential negative impact of television on the relatively new medium of radio by propagating unfavourable reviews in the press. However, the journal *Radiovision* was one publication that did attempt to promote a climate favourable to the introduction of television in Australia. This, of course, was due to the fact the publication was published by Television and Radio Laboratories, a company that wished to exploit the local commercial potential of television. Despite the early critical opinions of television in the Australian press, it is important to note that Australian newspapers would become key shareholders in the establishment of the Australian television industry.

As made evident within this article Australia's involvement with television dates back well prior to 1956. There are numerous examples of individuals experimenting in the field of television, for example Sutton's work that influenced Baird's work in Britain. Australian manufacturers made attempts to introduce television much earlier than 1956, including facilitating local demonstration. Television and Radio Laboratories made attempts to influence industry and government with its journal *Radiovision*, at a time when television was still in its early developmental stages globally.

Whilst it would be more than 30 years after the 1927 article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* before television would be officially introduced in Australia. This article has made evident the hitherto neglected pre-history of Australian television prior to the official 1956 inauguration. Exposing a gap in current literature about Australian television. The pre-history of television forms an essential part of the overall narrative of the medium. This is evident by the wealth of literature associated earlier developments of television in Britain and the United States, prior to the inauguration. However, as has been stated in this article, historians of television in Australia have

invariably commenced the narrative with the 1956 inauguration and consequently have neglected the pre-history of television in this country.

This article draws attention to the early public discussions, particularly in the press, which influenced Australians' perception of television. This resulted in a far more informed public when television was introduced in 1956. The article has revealed several aspects to Australian television's pre-history that require further analysis. These include further investigation into Australian inventors and the Australian press and its relationship to growing public awareness of television in Australia, prior to the 1956 inauguration. An important question raised by this article is when Australia's television history actually began. It has been shown that current literature tends to underestimate the depth of this history and that there is still a gap in the literature associated with the history of television in Australia.

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