

Conclusion

Television went live in Sydney and Melbourne in 1956, in Brisbane, Adelaide and Perth in 1959 and in the rest of the country throughout the 1960s and into the 1970s. Although radio remained on air after the introduction of television, the presence of a new broadcast medium profoundly changed the character of its programming.¹ During the 1960s, radio became increasingly focused on music as young listeners played popular hits on their new transistor radio sets. Since radio's inception, talkback radio had been forbidden due to a law that prohibited conversations over the wireless so that radio would not compete with postal and telegraphic services, but talkback sessions were finally legalised in 1967. Many commercial stations, most notably Sydney's 2GB, embraced talk programming to appeal to older demographics and differentiate themselves from the hit-dominated programming of rival commercial stations.² The 1960s saw a significant shift in how Australians listened to the radio, which demographics listened and the types of programs that were aired.

In 1957, Catherine King, the compere of the popular women's session on the Australian Broadcasting Commission's (ABC) Western Australian network, accompanied her husband Alec on a sabbatical to the United Kingdom. While there, she attended a course at the British Broadcasting Corporation on television production so that she would be ready to take full advantage of the new medium when it arrived in Perth. Early in 1960, plans for a women's session began to be developed in anticipation of the medium's introduction to the west, and it went to air on 1 April 1960. For two years, King worked on the weekly television show as well as her daily radio program. The television show was broadcast for 30 minutes

1 Bridget Griffen-Foley, *Changing Stations: The Story of Australian Commercial Radio* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2009), 269–70.

2 *Ibid.*, 345, 382–84.

on Wednesday afternoons, but required extensive time to script, shoot and produce. Although initially enthusiastic about the new medium due to its potential to show people in action, King quickly soured on it. She believed that television production divided staff too rigidly between departments, and, as such, it did not engender the same collegiality as radio. Further, the introduction of the visual element meant that much more could go wrong on television. Stretched by the responsibilities of hosting both a daily radio session and a weekly television show, King resigned from television in April 1962 to preserve not only her health but also the quality of her radio program, which had remained her priority.³

King's experience with television highlights some of the reasons why radio was so useful to the development of women's citizenship from the 1920s until the mid-1950s. Television's overly rigid departmental structures, which prevented staff from moving between different tasks, meant that King did not have the same level of control over what went to air. Further, although television enabled audiences to see the presenters, the visual aspect of television required presenters to act on air, which worked to create greater distance between the presenters and the audience. King felt that television was about creating entertainment more than fostering conversations.⁴

Radio gave Australian women a new way to easily access the public sphere from their homes; as Dame Enid Lyons stated in 1954, a woman could now 'do two things at a time: cultivate her mind and do her housework'.⁵ Women now had opportunities to publicly speak in their own voices and be audibly heard on a significant scale. As Lyons argued, 'generations of treatment as the intellectual inferiors of men' had meant that women were reluctant to become involved in public affairs, but the opportunity to speak in public and hear other women doing so had resulted in 'a big change in women's confidence in themselves and men's readiness to accept them as mental equals'.⁶ Although it is difficult to assess the accuracy of her claim, it is notable that radio often featured in the rhetoric of leading public women at this time, many of whom identified it as an instrument of women's advancement. The women in this book saw radio as a medium

3 Julie Lewis, *On Air: The Story of Catherine King and the ABC Women's Session* (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1979), 111–16.

4 *Ibid.*, 114–15.

5 'Dame Enid Lyons: ABC Commissioner', *ABC Weekly*, 27 March 1954, 20.

6 *Ibid.*

that had the potential to transform women's lives and status in society, and they worked to both claim their own voices in the public sphere and encourage other women to become active citizens.

Radio was first introduced to Australia in 1923 and had become well established by the end of the decade. During the 1930s, feminists such as Linda Littlejohn used broadcasting to fight against attacks on women's rights, argue for women's equality and encourage women to actively participate in social and political life. The Great Depression further shaped both radio programming and the development of women's citizenship as women such as Eunice Stelzer started radio clubs and women's session comperes used their platforms to improve the lives of their listeners. The 1930s were also a time of increasing international tensions, and women presenters such as Constance Duncan, Irene Greenwood and Ruby Rich used radio to contribute to public discourse as active world citizens, encouraging their listeners to become engaged with world affairs. By using broadcasting for different purposes—to work for social justice, promote feminism and contribute to debates on international affairs—these women demonstrated the value of radio as a tool for active citizenship and further opened up the public sphere to women's voices and opinions on social and political issues.

As in World War I (WWI), women again demonstrated that they were active, patriotic citizens during World War II (WWII) by taking up volunteer work, joining the auxiliary services and working in industry. Women stepped into new positions in radio where they used their skills to boost morale and encourage other women to do their patriotic duty in Australia; some also tried to increase support for the war among American women by giving short-wave broadcasts. However, there were cuts to women's sessions on the ABC during the war years due to financial constraints, which underscored the lower status given to this type of programming by the ABC's management. During WWII, Lyons and (Dame) Dorothy Tangney were elected to the Australian Commonwealth Parliament, which was a watershed moment for Australian political history and the development of women's equal citizenship. Public speaking, and broadcasting in particular, was a central aspect of political citizenship in the 1940s. Lyons, Tangney and Jessie Street (who also stood as a political candidate in this period) all made use of broadcasting to legitimise their political candidacy and integrate women into formal politics. Through their broadcasting, these women staked their claim as patriotic citizens and legitimate legislators; public speech, including radio speech, became

a key aspect of how they practised and asserted equal citizenship. Radio enabled them to reach into the home and involve women listeners in political debate.

During the postwar era, soap operas increasingly replaced women's sessions as the dominant form of women's programming in morning timeslots on the commercial stations. This concerned several female broadcasters, including Greenwood, Catherine King and Ida Elizabeth Jenkins, all of whom used their sessions to promote active citizenship to their listeners. However, despite their hard work, soap operas continued to displace women's sessions, a trend that was further exacerbated by the introduction of television in 1956. By the 1950s, Australia's increasing prosperity and the rise of more sophisticated forms of broadcast entertainment converged to reduce the demand for women's spoken-word broadcasts, and, while King, Greenwood and Jenkins used their own programs to fight for the place of sharp, civic-minded programming during daytime sessions, by the 1960s the place of women's radio sessions had significantly declined. The erosion of women's broadcasting as a key part of active citizenship during the 1950s demonstrates that the medium was a useful tool at a specific period in time; however, as broader political, social and cultural changes occurred, its resonance lessened. By the mid-1950s, radio had become firmly established in Australia and older forms of programming began to seem outdated in comparison to soap operas and variety shows.

Radio had particular significance for women in areas outside of the major east coast capitals of Sydney and Melbourne, and these local stories complicate the national narrative of women's empowerment through broadcasting. Local women's clubs and sessions eradicated the distance between women living in regional areas and actively worked to improve conditions in their communities—for example, by raising money to upgrade amenities and infrastructure as well as providing direct help to women in need. Women's sessions in Western Australia and Queensland integrated women in the state's remote regions, while also fostering distinctive state identities over the airwaves. Broadcasting was used to address the differing needs of women in regions across the country. It also became a central part of women's civic activity in regional areas during the mid-twentieth century, as a number of women broadcasters took on public roles within their local communities. Radio was not a transformative medium for all women, however. Indigenous women were largely left out of the imagined audience of women listeners, although there is some evidence of Aboriginal women listening to the ABC

women's session in Queensland. It was also rare for Aboriginal women to speak on the radio. One woman who did, Nora Shea, was interviewed on Greenwood's program *Woman to Woman* in the 1950s in her capacity as the 'first' Aboriginal woman to work in the Western Australian public service, as discussed in Chapter 5.

Radio's significance as a tool that aided the development of women's citizenship was due to a confluence of factors; these reveal that the medium itself both reflected and drove broader changes during the mid-twentieth century. First, the medium was a key technology of modernity that transformed communications and media. Its status as a new, cutting-edge technology meant that it was well positioned to challenge the status quo of the gendered soundscape of the public sphere. Indeed, by giving regular airtime to women, radio stations provided a new space for them to contribute to public discourse. Second, radio's time as the dominant broadcast medium occurred during a period of profound social and political shifts. Coming so soon after the end of WWI, the advent of radio characterised the hope for a modern future. However, the onset of the Great Depression from 1929, coupled with the rise of fascism and the increasing geopolitical strife that led to WWII, brought forth an age of profound instability.

Finally, this period saw significant changes to women's status in Australia. White women's participation in domestic service and home-based economies had declined in the late nineteenth century and they increasingly worked in the manufacturing, retail and service industries, and in professions such as teaching and nursing, as well as office work. The trend of women's increased participation in the workforce continued during the twentieth century, including spikes in workforce participation during WWI and WWII. Women claimed greater social and sexual freedoms in this period. The flapper of the 1920s was associated with 'consumerism, feminine beauty and sports' as well as visible sexuality, and WWII was a period of sexual exploration for many young women who became involved with visiting American servicemen.⁷ Many women travelled, most often to Britain but also to the United States and, as discussed

7 Rebecca Preston, 'From "Precocious Brat to Fluffy Flapper": The Evolution of the Australian Flapper', *Lilith: A Feminist History Journal*, no. 21 (2015): 44; Marilyn Lake, 'Female Desires: The Meaning of World War II', *Australian Historical Studies* 24, no. 95 (1990): 267–84.

in Chapter 2, to Asia.⁸ Women also undertook a wide range of political activity. As discussed in Chapter 1, the interwar period was characterised by the dominance of large women's organisations that promoted mostly non-party approaches to politics that emphasised the commonalities of women's experiences and structured their political demands accordingly. Women also began to be elected to parliament, first in small numbers in state legislatures and then, in 1943, to the Commonwealth Parliament. By the 1960s and the advent of the women's liberation movement, equality with men in the public sphere had become a central focus of feminist demands, from Merle Thornton and Rosalie Bognor's demand to drink in the front bar of Brisbane's Regatta Hotel to campaigns against discriminatory hiring practices and abortion restrictions.⁹

Within this context, radio provided another change to women's status, as it served as a new platform from which women could articulate their viewpoints. The regular presence of female voices on the airwaves, while often located in timeslots and programs specifically delineated for that purpose, was a notable development that differentiated radio from print media. As seen throughout this book, radio's focus on the voice made it a more intimate medium, and listeners regularly identified radio voices as being central to successful broadcasts. Skilled broadcasters relied on their radio speech to connect with their audiences and present a persuasive message. This book has revealed that one of the major contributions of broadcasting to women's advancement was its ability to normalise the sound of women's voices in the public sphere, as the advent of radio enabled women to speak publicly on a daily basis. While the airtime given to women's voices was far less than that given to men, it should be recognised that their roles on the air enabled them to speak for themselves. Because of this, as Muriel Sutch argued in 1934, radio 'played a not unimportant part in feminine emancipation'.¹⁰

The story of radio's role in the development of women's citizenship further emphasises the importance of the media as a tool for women's advancement and empowerment. This is a topic that continues to have

8 See: Angela Woollacott, *To Try Her Fortune in London: Australian Women, Colonialism, and Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Yves Rees, 'Travelling to Tomorrow: Australian Women in the United States, 1910–1960' (PhD thesis, The Australian National University, 2016).

9 Marilyn Lake, *Getting Equal: The History of Australian Feminism* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1999), 214–27.

10 Muriel Sutch, 'Broadcasting from a Woman's Viewpoint', *Broadcast Year Book and Radio Listeners' Annual*, 1934, 88.

relevance today. In 2016, journalist Julia Baird wrote that ‘the reluctance of women to stand in the spotlight and voice an opinion is real’ in Australia, as women participate in public life against a backdrop of criticism and hostility to their presence.¹¹ The internet has opened up new avenues for sexism and abuse, and social media sites can become ‘aggregators of online misogyny’.¹² Conversely, social media sites have also provided women with new spaces to discuss issues pertaining to their lives and to call out oppression and abuse, powerfully seen in the Me Too movement against sexual harassment and assault.¹³ As Michelle Smith has argued, feminist social media movements:

Express the challenges of being a woman in a world where it only takes a mere scratch of the surface to reveal hostility and deep discomfort about women’s ever-strengthening public voice.¹⁴

Speaking continues to be a frequent theme among contemporary feminists who refer to ‘speaking out’, being ‘loud’ and ‘shrill’, or giving voice to ‘unspeakable things’ as part of their activism.¹⁵

Social media has provided new ways of engaging in public debate and resisting oppression by enabling anyone to use the platforms to connect with others in real time. According to feminist Laurie Penny, the internet produced a feminist revival in the mid-2000s, as it enabled women to talk online with each other.¹⁶ While social media has certainly transformed the way we communicate and obtain information, it should also be recognised that the current feminist uses of social media are part of a much longer history of women’s engagement in the media, including broadcast media. In its time, radio provided new ways of contributing to the public sphere by enabling live verbal communication that could reach large audiences and foster intimate connections with individual listeners.

11 Julia Baird, ‘Women’s Voices Stifled While Men Run the Media’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, February 12, 2016, www.smh.com.au/comment/womens-voices-stifled-while-men-run-media-2016-0211-gms4u6.html, accessed 16 December 2017.

12 Carrie A. Rentschler, ‘Rape Culture and the Feminist Politics of Social Media’, *Girlhood Studies* 7, no. 1 (2014): 65.

13 #MeToo spread virally in October 2017 in response to allegations of sexual assault against Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein and, later, against many other well-known entertainment industry figures including director Brett Ratner, actor Kevin Spacey and comedian Louis C. K. Many women used the hashtag to come forward with their own experiences of sexual harassment and assault.

14 Michelle Smith, ‘Friday Essay: Talking, Writing and Fighting like Girls’, *Conversation*, 30 September 2016, theconversation.com/friday-essay-talking-writing-and-fighting-like-girls-66211?utm, accessed 16 December 2017.

15 Ibid.

16 Laurie Penny quoted in Smith, ‘Friday Essay’.

Through broadcasting, women formed communities and spoke directly to each other. Although the broadcasters in this thesis had to exhibit patrician ideals of educated, eloquent speech to secure their positions on the air, they played an important role in shifting the accepted boundaries of how women could participate in the public sphere by modelling active citizenship and encouraging their listeners to become engaged citizens themselves. The feminists of today are, therefore, part of a continuing line of women who identified media as a key tool of women's emancipation and used it to claim their public voice.

This text is taken from *Sound Citizens: Australian Women Broadcasters Claim their Voice, 1923–1956*, by Catherine Fisher, published 2021 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.