

# Sound Citizens: Australian Women Broadcasters Claim Their Voice, 1923–1956

Belinda Eslick  
University of Queensland

---

*Sound Citizens: Australian Women Broadcasters Claim Their Voice, 1923–1956*

Catherine Fisher  
(Canberra: ANU Press, 2021, 196pp. AU\$55)  
ISBN: 9781760464301

---

Catherine Fisher's *Sound Citizens* offers a valuable and much-needed account of the significant contributions of female broadcasters in Australia, tracking women's involvement in radio from the introduction of radio broadcasting in 1923 to the introduction of television in 1956. Fisher organises this account around discussions of the significance of female broadcasters during the interwar period, through the Second World War, and in post-war Australia. Importantly, the book challenges the view that the designation of separate 'women's programs' on radio merely reinforced patriarchal expectations of women's civic role (i.e. as restricted to the home). *Sound Citizens* offers an important cultural representation of women's voices in Australian broadcasting and in public discourse more broadly, demonstrating how women used radio to advocate for social change and to encourage other women to engage in local, national and global affairs—often by making important links between the 'private' and 'public' spheres. As Fisher convincingly argues, radio transformed women's lives because it was a medium that women working in the home could engage with while doing unpaid or paid domestic work and care.

Early in the book, Fisher notes some perceptions of women's voices on radio as 'too shrill' or 'lacking in authority' (8). However, these sections are brief, and Fisher does not ruminate on the sometimes negative reception of women's voices on radio. Instead, Fisher offers more evidence

of those defending the place of women's voices on the airwaves than of those who considered female voices out of place—evidence that 'women speakers could, and did, exhibit good radio voices that conformed to the highest standards of elocution' (9). Fisher also details many prominent female broadcasters including Ruby Rich, whose broadcast scripts from the 1930s and 1940s are 'some of the best examples of the evocative power of radio speech as a form of social activism' (65). As Fisher notes, Rich 'underlined or capitalised words that needed to be stressed, included numerous exclamation points, noted where she should pause to breathe ... and ... wrote ... in a conversational and engaging style that brought the scripts to life' (65). Fisher's case studies of broadcasters like Rich, who was a feminist and peace activist and 'believed in the power of talking to a female audience', demonstrate that women were highly skilled, socially and politically important orators (65).

The book first tracks the development of women's involvement with radio alongside and amongst the activity of women's organisations in Australia during the interwar period. Women's organisations of this period 'recognised the role of radio as a tool that was especially well suited to raising the political consciousness of women in the home' (34). For example, the Housewives Association used radio to promote 'an image of the civically engaged housewife who made problems such as the price of bread and milk into political issues' while emphasising the need for women to organise and act collectively (34). Fisher gives important emphasis to class in her analysis and describes how some broadcasters, including the organising secretary of the Housewives Association, built class consciousness among listeners by emphasising the need to organise for the benefit of the poor. However, Fisher also makes clear how broadcasting roles (and thus a public voice) were largely reserved for those with class and racial privilege, showing how radio reinforced 'exclusionary discourses of women's public citizenship by highlighting a white, middle-class ideal of who should occupy public space' (105).

Fisher also describes the important social function of women's broadcasting during key historical periods such as the Great Depression and WWII, describing the ways that radio encouraged a sense of community and shared experience. However, women's more overt political messages and social advocacy were limited through WWII, when, as Fisher notes, radio was heavily censored by the Department of Information. As in other industries, however, the war brought opportunities for women to fill male-dominated industries or male-only roles, including in broadcasting.

Fisher notes that by 1942, over 20 per cent of the ABC's staff had joined the armed forces, which created opportunities for women to join the broadcasting ranks as technicians, sound officers, journalists, librarians, producers and announcers. Female broadcasters used radio during the war to demonstrate that women were engaged and active citizens and to emphasise women's experiences of the war and contributions to the war effort. Following the war, female broadcasters used radio to express 'the need for greater numbers of women in public affairs' and to bring discussion of women's equality into the public discourse (96). However, the role of radio for women shifted, as Fisher notes, in the 1940s and 1950s in the lead-up to the launch of television. During this time, talk-based women's sessions, which had 'provided women with a platform to contribute to public discourse', made way for radio serials and soap operas that 'treated women as listener-consumers who took in advertising messages along with addictive storylines' (120).

While female broadcasters were mostly relegated to designated 'women's hours' during the period that Fisher details, *Sound Citizens* leaves an impression that women dominated the airwaves on both public and commercial broadcasting during this time. The positive contribution of women's voices—both literal and figurative—to Australian broadcasting is overwhelmingly foregrounded in the book. This feels especially valuable and important given the ways that male voices dominate radio in contemporary Australia, especially on news, talkback and primetime programs on commercial FM stations. Importantly, *Sound Citizens* carves out a space in Australian radio as absolutely the rightful place of women.

This text is taken from *Lilith: A Feminist History Journal: Number 28*,  
published 2022 by ANU Press, The Australian National University,  
Canberra, Australia.