

School of Social Sciences

FROM PRODUCTION HOUSES TO RELAY STATIONS

**A SOCIAL HISTORY OF
COMMERCIAL TELEVISION IN PERTH
WESTERN AUSTRALIA**

With special reference to the years 1958 –1990

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**This thesis is presented as part of the requirements for
the award of the Degree Doctor of Philosophy
of the Curtin University of Technology**

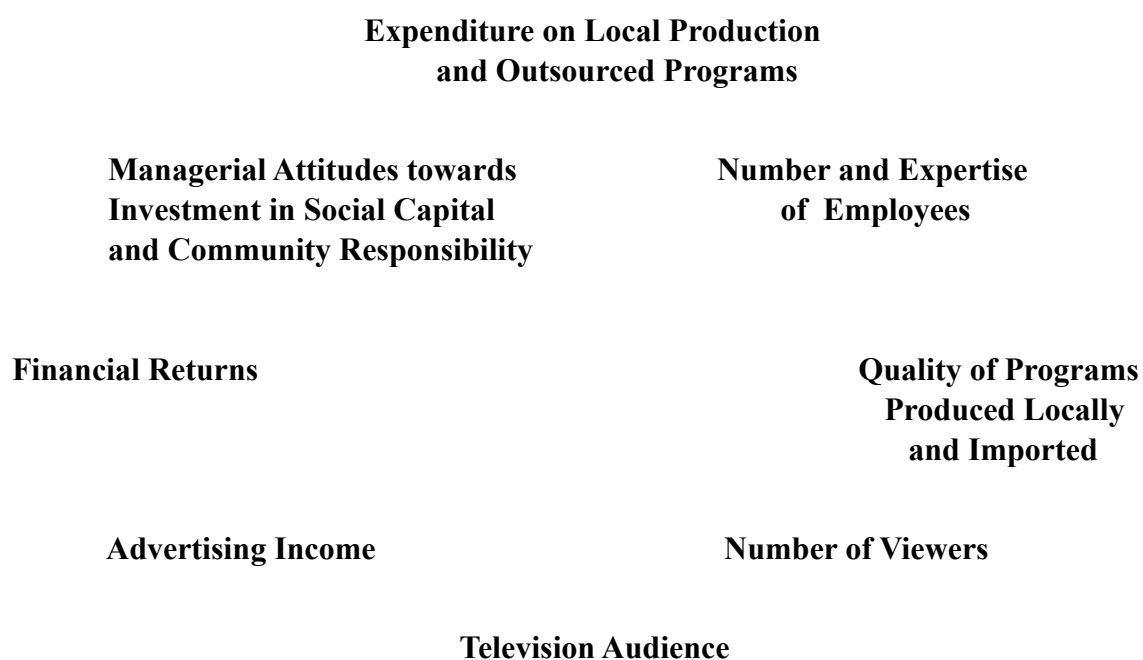
I hereby declare that this thesis has not already been accepted in substance for any Degree. It is the result of my own independent research, and all sources that have been consulted are acknowledged in the bibliography.

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ABSTRACT

The thesis examines the continuing interaction of local 'live' production, audience ratings, financial returns and managerial attitudes to community responsibility during the first thirty-two years of commercial television in Western Australia. It is argued that during this period the nature of commercial Western Australian television companies changed dramatically. From being creative production houses, developing their own local 'live' content programs, they have become mere relay houses relying almost entirely on programs developed in other parts of Australia and overseas. The local 'live' part of television was born of the necessity to provide program content at little cost, grew as part of a perceived community responsibility by the television stations and was fostered by their competition. Its demise was due to misplaced Federal Government regulation, technological changes, networking and a diminution in community responsibility engendered by corporate greed.

The following diagram represents the relationship and interdependency of the various factors that shaped the early history of commercial television in Western Australia.



Survey Ratings

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PREFACE:

Television in Australia could have been implemented many years earlier than 1956 but its introduction was delayed by the irresolute attitudes of successive governments. In 1953 a 12 inch, 78 r.p.m. record entitled ‘Here’s Hooey’ was issued in Australia by Regal Zonophone. Described as a humorous sketch it was a spoof on the radio formats of the day. In a simulated quiz program the question is asked, ‘Give me an answer between yes and no?’, to which a doltish voice replies, ‘Television!’. Although meant as a joke, this extract was incisively close to the then prevailing Australian situation.

Whilst the new medium had become ensconced in America and Great Britain, there had been a wait and see policy in Australia. As early as the 1920s experiments in television had been conducted in Australia, and in 1942 a Parliamentary Standing Committee was instituted to examine the viability of providing transmissions in the capital cities. At that time the country was governed by the Labor Party under Prime Minister John Curtin and the prevailing notion that television should be controlled by the state persisted until 1948 when the Chifley Labor Government amended the Broadcasting Act, endowing the Australian Broadcasting Commission with sole responsibility for establishing television under the direction of the Broadcasting Control Board. With the election of the Menzies/McEwen Liberal/Country Party Government in 1949, this policy was reversed to fall in line with the situation pertaining to radio stations. There would be a national telecaster and commercial television would be allowed under government guidelines. The following year members of the Television Advisory Committee traveled overseas to examine the state of the industry in

various countries. Their recommendations for early establishment were shelved due to the economic downturn in 1951.¹

In 1953 a Royal Commission under the leadership of the Vice-Chancellor of Melbourne University, Professor George Paton advocated the early introduction of the television system with an ABC channel and two commercial channels in both Sydney and Melbourne. The selection of the licence holders was to be under the auspices of the Broadcasting Control Board and the applicants were to be considered at sittings to be

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held in January and February of 1955. These hearings resulted in the issue of licences to applicants closely allied to the newspaper industry, in line with the recommendations of 1953. The first telecasts would go to air in 1956 with Channels 2, 7 and 9 operating in Sydney and Melbourne. From the start, the main issues revolved around matters of economics, whilst the wishes of those who viewed the new medium from an artistic viewpoint in regard to televised content and its production were relegated to second place.² A 1956 comment said that commercial television was, ‘...seeking out the lowest common denominator in order to secure the largest possible audience...’³ This policy has prevailed and along with ‘networking’ and technological advances has been the main reason for the decline in local production in the less populated cities of Australia. This tendency was noted and commented upon in the 1970s⁴ and according to some observers, the main centres of production in Sydney and Melbourne are destined towards the same end.

¹ ‘Television the Great Communicator’, in *Australia’s Heritage Pty. Ltd.*, Hamlyn, Sydney, 1971, pp.2277-79.

² Ibid.

³ James Walter, ‘Citizen, Consumer, Culture: The establishment of Television in Public Consciousness’, in *Everyday Wonders Australian Popular Culture Number 58*, Richard Nile (ed.), University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia, 1998, p.108. op.cit. ‘TV In Australia, *Voice: The Australian Monthly Review*, July-Aug 1956, p.4.

⁴ ‘Television the Great Communicator’, in *Australia’s Heritage Pty. Ltd.*, Sydney, 1971, pp.2277-78. Sandra Hall, *Supertoy*, Sun Books, Melbourne, 1976, p.5.

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For many years from 1965 I was involved in commercial television as both an on-air presenter and producer. I have remained in close association with the people of both commercial television stations since, the greatest number of whom are still friends or acquaintances of mine. Without exception, both women and men have all been most helpful, by way of taped interviews, written communication, photographs, Annual Returns and personal memorabilia. Special thanks are extended to Sir James Cruthers, the ‘father’ of Western Australian television. My appreciation to A.C. Neilsen and Associates in Sydney is recorded, for their help in providing an office in which to work for two weeks in 2000 and retrieving the early Audience Survey Ratings books from the N.S.W. Government Archives.

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To the best of my knowledge, this is the first time that the history of the first thirty-two years of commercial television in Western Australia has been the topic of academic research. The fact that apparently no other scholar has attempted this task before, has had both advantages and disadvantages, but from the point of view of satisfaction, the five years that I have spent on this thesis have been the most enjoyable of my life. The contact with so many from the past has been exceptionally gratifying. In a few short year’s time, the contributors to these pages (including myself) will be no more. It is pleasant to contemplate that their involvement and memories will endure.

I thank my Mum and Dad (who did so much for others) for my life and like to think that my achievements would give them a rewarding satisfaction with *their* work in creating me! Finally to my whole family and especially my wife of 44 years Patricia May, you are the

greatest! I promise that you will not have to call me Doctor should my efforts in that direction be of acceptable standard to those in whose hands I place this tome and my trust.