

**GENDERING RADIO RESEARCH:
The circuit of everyday culture**

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Abstract

This paper sketches the establishment, consolidation and decline of the Australian Broadcasting Commission's (ABC) 'Women's Session'. I argue that radio programming aimed at, and presented by, women during the twentieth century was significant as cultural form unique to a particular stage in the constitution of a middle-class female subject. It opens up the question of how a new subject position for women was constructed in the challenge that public service radio broadcasting made to divisions between public and private spheres.

Radio research offers a unique opportunity to combine archival research with analysis of media texts to investigate gender formation through media history. The application of contemporary gender theory to interaction between audience and institution questions notions of public broadcasting and the public sphere. Radio studies needs to interrogate 'the public' as both traditional media theorists and broadcasters themselves have defined it. Analyses of audience responses to the programs demonstrate that women actively negotiated the meaning of the programs, and through their engagement with the medium, sought involvement in civic life during this period. I advocate the use of a feminist cultural studies method in a media studies context to articulate 'the relationship between different sites' of the production of gender and make connections between 'everyday practices, institutional inscriptions and cultural habits' (Craik 1992, 89-98).

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Radio Studies

Introduction

Radio has been termed 'one of the pillars of civil society, combining entertainment and democracy, sound and citizenship' (Hartley 2000: 153). In its earliest inception radio technology was constituted as both the sign and agent of modern home life in a democratic society (Lacey 2000). Radio, and more specifically government funded or 'public service' broadcasting, has also been linked to the construction of a democratic public sphere, both 'speaking to the public' and letting the 'public speak' (Potts 1989: 172). Johnson, in her landmark study of Australian radio, has provided an account of how, from the 30s onwards, '[t]he discourses of radio constituted a new type of citizen: individuals... brought together only as an abstract collectivity -- as a nation or the Empire' (Johnson 1988: 204).

Women were initially constructed as a nascent radio public along these lines; both as isolated individuals awaiting the new cultural form of domestic radio broadcast from a central location, and as copious audience available for daytime programming (Johnson 1988: 20, 105). The way in which this audience was imagined drew on

existing modes of address to women as consumers established during the 1910s and 20s in mass-circulation newspapers and magazines (Beetham ed. 2001; Greenfield & Reid 1998; Johnson 1988: 21). Well before television, radio sought to address women across generation, class, ethnicity, and race in varied modes: as consumers, citizens, intimate confidantes, and subjects in need of education. Debate over what women needed -- rather than wanted -- to hear on radio, and what was the best format in which to deliver it, constantly exercised broadcasters during the medium's formative era (Douglas 1999: 141-144). This paper is an argument for examining question of gender and media through the lens of the 'circuit of culture': the schema developed by Paul de Gay and Stuart Hall to examine the interactions between the spheres of cultural production, regulation, consumption, identification and representation (du Gay et al. 1995). It takes as a case study of this the topic of my ARC-funded postdoctoral project, a history of the ABC's (Australian Broadcasting Commission's) Women's Session, which ran from the 1930s to the 1970s.¹ Although I am at the early stages of this project, I also wish to use this opportunity to lay out some of the methodological problems and potentials of gendering radio research. The first section of this paper describes the tensions that at first energised and ultimately contributed to the program's decline, then each section following explains the location of the cultural form of the session within this circuit of media culture.

Who listens?

In developing the particular market niche of the Women's Session in the 1930s, the ABC imagined a kind of listener who wanted an alternative to both the trivial pleasures offered by the 'low-brow' culture of Commercial stations and 'service' or 'utility' programming composed entirely of domestic hints and recipes. Disputes over what the program should contain, and hostility from the management to any radical change of the format (especially the introduction of political material or discussions of current affairs) reveals how the woman listener emerged as a focus for debate about the ideal subject of public service broadcasting during the first few decades of the ABC's operation in Australia. Women's programming set out to balance the need for contemplation or close attention with the recognition of a distracted audience with many demands on their attention. The debate had escalated during the late 1930s, and regular Session host, Gladys Moore, articulated one version of how this ideal listener's personal needs would fit with what the program could offer. Moore was a regular contributor to the program who had been broadcasting talks to women on the ABC since 1935. She described her audience as a 'vast middle-brow audience of women with limited opportunities and limited incomes, yet interested in the world at large and any subject outside the purely domestic routine'. These women were therefore set apart from both 'a comparatively leisured class with high educational standards' and 'a very large section [of women radio listeners] in the city and suburbs whom it would be almost impossible to enlist as regular adherents of a National station'. The latter, Moore claimed, preferred the existing Commercial radio sessions, which included ' "Dorothy Dix" [an agony aunt], telling fortunes and character by handwriting, and a vast amount of particulars about the lives and matrimonial

¹ My interest in and awareness of the Women's Session as an important media form emerged from research conducted as a UTS postdoctoral fellow on another ARC project on social definitions of the Australian housewife, 1940-1970, and I would like to acknowledge the counsel of Lesley Johnson and other researchers within the Faculty of Humanities and Social

arrangements or disarrangements of film stars'.² Shortly after this discussion, Mrs Moore responded to unsolicited criticism of the program from a Sydney journalist, Josephine O'Neill -- who thought the program had 'little relation to current life' and that it 'talked down to the listener' -- by offering the response of '1,000 country women' at a Country Women's Association Conference in Orange:

I... put these questions to them -- which do you prefer A or B?

(a) List of talks covering domesticities. Received in absolute silence, without a vote in its favour!

(b) The list of travel talks, and talks on general topics. Received with a storm of applause!³

Mrs Moore had written to the NSW State Manager of the ABC in 1937, Mr Horner, soon after this conference, expressing her dismay and contradicting his proposal for the program to include more of the kind of material on her first list -- talks covering domesticities. She explained her initial surprise at this lack of interest on the part of the country audience in the 'utility' items of the program and their preference for cultural material:

I was interested to see that these comments came from a fair number of women who would not be very highly educated or of considerable social standing... I was also interested to find that so many women listened almost entirely to National programmes as opposed to those from the commercial stations. This applied to women of very varying grades of society.⁴

ABC management, however, disagreed with the perception, promoted by its female Talks employees, that women wanted to be educated and 'broadened' through serious talks about politics and current affairs. Basil Kirke, NSW State Manager in 1943, considered the housewife to be a thoroughly 'distracted' listener, unavailable for cultural improvement:

I consider any form of solid education, news review, music primarily for the music lover, forum (meaning After the war -- Then What? type of broadcast) or wholly cultural talks are wasted time in this session. The busy housewife has only half an ear on the radio, because she is thinking of a dozen things in her daily round. She wants to be mildly entertained without using her brain to any appreciable extent.⁵

The session hosts, despite such edicts from management, did not maintain rigidly-held distinctions between women's social position and interest in public life, and actively sought to include women in a public discourse about women's historical position in Australian and international politics. Whereas ABC management continued to define

² Memo from Mrs Moore to Mr Horner, AA SP341/ 1/ 1, File II, 1938-1943, File No. 15.5, 5 May 1937, pp. 1-2.

³ Response by Mrs Moore to Josephine O'Neill's Report on the Women's Session, AA SP341/ 1/ 1, File II, 1938-1943, File No. 15.5, 17 January 1938, p. 1.

⁴ Letter to Mr Horner, AA SP341/ 1/ 1 File I, 1937-1941, File No. 15.5, 20 March 1937.

⁵ Memo from BW Kirke to Federal Director of Talks and Federal Controller of Talks, AA SP

the role of the woman in the home as central to the 'Women's Session', not just in the way it dictated the content of the scripts, but in the way the program was structured through its attention to topics defined as 'feminine', its hosts tended to object. The eventual result, a compromise between satisfying the ideal and distracted listener, tried to balance this address to women at home with demands for an 'uplifting' cultural form, which would acknowledge women's public roles.

Regulation

In the Australian case, the Reithian imperative, adopted by the ABC from the BBC, to educate the ordinary listener through cultural programming and thus democratise the public sphere took on special dimensions in relation to women. Radio programming in Australia during the 1930s and early 40s reveals much about how cultural institutions such as the ABC imagined women would participate in modern life, tending to broadcast talks on domestic management to 'women at home'. Yet this hail to women was complicated by the transformative potential of the new form. The Commission, on the one hand, constructed its audience through the notion of a 'feminine interest' in the daily life of the home, while, on the other, sought to lift women 'from the atmosphere of the gas stove and ironing board' (Inglis 1983: 32). An over-riding objective to 'better' or 'raise up' women through talks on culture and politics alongside those dealing with as domestic matters produced a middle-brow sensibility which was criticised for patronising listeners (32). It also describes a complex and negotiated relationship to domesticity and the private sphere, which was apparent in other texts of the era, such as film and magazines (Lloyd & Johnson 2003).

Despite the ABC's deep suspicion of audience research -- which it saw as 'unscientific' and biased towards commercial advertisers because of implicit links between market researchers and advertising agencies -- from the 1930s onwards ABC managers took careful note of studies which showed that commercial radio broadcasting to women was far more popular (1% of all possible listeners were estimated to be tuned to the ABC during the broadcasts). So began a constant need to balance 'distraction' and informational or 'uplifting' material in women's programming on the ABC if it was to attract a significant audience (Inglis 1983: 239). This combination was unique among the media of the time, and elicited a devoted audience response from the small segment of the available audience who listened. Middle-class listeners felt a particular connection with the program as it connected with their daily lives, self-understandings as women, and affirmed their role as 'modern women'. For example, broadcasts of a series of talks by a female doctor on the 'stages in women's biological and social lives' in 1962, while controversial for their frank discussion of the female anatomy, elicited a dramatic response from listeners, and over twelve thousand listeners wrote to request copies of the scripts (Inglis 1983: 239).

The perceived need to segment the radio audience along gender lines and construct an 'imagined community' of women through popular culture declined sharply during the late 1960s following the introduction of television in Australia in 1956. The 'Women's Session's were completely discontinued in 1971. Following management changes in the wake of the election of the Whitlam federal government in 1972, and accompanied by intense pressure for reform from staff, during International Women's Year in 1975 the ABC re-established women's programming in the form of feminist

programs, now directed by the Australian Women's Broadcasting Co-operative (AWBC) (Inglis 1983: 365; Fell & Wenzel eds 1995). Discourse surrounding these events, specifically that which argued for and against the formation and abolition of women's programming on the national broadcaster, provides evidence of how the assumptions of public service broadcasting changed over time in relation to what Raymond Williams has termed a 'consensus' of the 'public interest' (Williams 1974: 39).

Identification

Women's positioning in public radio programming have been subject to ongoing negotiation from both inside and out, audience and institution. This remarkable history has not always been matched by theorising about media because of disciplinary boundaries between media, history and sociology. Feminist media theory has not previously been able to account for the specific claims on public sphere that women made during the post-war period, partly because studies have focused on historical breaks and generational shifts: either the emergence of the figure of 'the new woman' in the early twentieth century or the second wave feminist struggles during the 1970s (the latter of which gave rise to programs such as those produced by the AWBC). Therefore we need to employ an interdisciplinary, cultural studies method in order to inform contemporary feminist media theory. The focus on historical case studies in radio research will offer a corrective to previous media theory in four important ways.

Firstly, feminist media activism of the 1970s sought to redress the perceived sexism of earlier eras through a focus on media 'stereotyping' and the construction of limited gender roles by instituting 'positive' and diverse representations of women and sexuality. Influenced by psychoanalysis, feminist film scholars theorised the feminine as totality, and as occupying a subject position of 'lack' or 'absence' in narratives that were constructed around male viewers (Gledhill 1988: 65). Feminist theory of the 1980s further emphasised these cultural aspects of media. Studies of 'female' genres such as soap opera sought to link gender and power and to emphasise a correct reading position, with an emphasis on how texts *should* be subverted or resisted in consumption (for example, Cranny-Francis and Palmer Gillard 1990).

Poststructuralist theorists of gender disputed this, contending that this deconstruction of gender actually further proscribed the subject positions available to women. Consequent studies have argued that the cultural sites are often contradictory and dialogic, and therefore the gendered subject should be seen as 'multiple, rather than divided or unified, and... excessive or heteronomous vis-à-vis the... sociocultural technologies of gender' (de Lauretis 1987: x). Recent feminist theory has therefore focused on the way that gender is a relational term 'that connects femininities and masculinities' (Probyn 2001: 37), and argues for a more nuanced analysis of gendering as a process, rather than a fixed category of personhood. These insights must be explored in cultural sites of historical importance in order to understand how gender has not been a fixed or stable term, even at times of apparent social constraint.

Secondly, a gender analysis complicates the way that democracy and the spread of media technologies have been linked in discussions of radio such as those by Hartley above. This particular notion of the democratic function of radio also emphasises the informational content of radio texts in a continuum with print media, rather than

allowing for analysis of the particular cultural form that broadcasting engenders (Williams 1974: 25). A focus on gender demonstrates that the notion of the public sphere inherent in terms such as 'democracy' and 'citizenship' is built upon masculinist and class-based assumptions about the relation of the domestic sphere to rational discourse. Historians of modernism have used women's engagement with popular culture and media technologies to argue that women did not remain excluded from the public sphere after the age of print, but that the 'public' has been differently constituted for, and imagined by women, as a means of engendering social change (Colomina ed. 1992; Petro 1989; Felski 1989; Fraser 1990). The focus of recent feminist cultural studies scholarship on the gendering of media in the new 'suburban' culture of the twentieth century demonstrates that media such as television, rather than simply delivering new kinds of 'information', shaped a new cultural space for women through a radical transgression of public/private boundaries (Douglas 1994; Lumby 1997) and, as Spigel has argued, produced a 'discursive space through which the family could mediate the contradictory impulses for a private haven on one hand, and community participation on the other' (Spigel 1992: 186). The role of radio in this aspect has not been explained in the Australian context, which given Australia has always had one of the highest rates of radio use is highly significant. This national focus needs to be underpinned by the development of a better understanding of how such discourses on the public are always 'strategic', tactical, and historically-specific. This study recognises that the cultural form of radio programming aimed at women was a historical precondition of the feminist public sphere, which, as Felski has suggested, unlike the bourgeois public sphere, 'constitutes a partial or counterpublic sphere' (Felski 1989: 167).

Thirdly, the tendency of media and cultural studies to overestimate the 'impact' of media texts, and underestimate the ways in which texts are shaped by their audiences needs to be countered by fine-grained analyses of how subjectivities have changed over time through engagement with media forms (Ang 1985, 1991, 1995). The case of the 'Women's Session' is exemplary in this respect. The ABC's correspondence between management, program-makers and hosts documents the tenuous position of women's programming within the institution and the media market. Responses from the Talks Department to Listener Research data provided to the ABC by George Anderson from the early 40s provides a way of assessing the contentious issue of the popularity of ABC programming. For example, as early as 1938, the Commission's Controller of Talks and Controller of Programmes were both uncertain that the sessions 'served any purpose' (Inglis 1983: 58). Nearly thirty years later, during 1965, the program's name was changed to *Morning Call* in an attempt to attract the increasing numbers of potential male listeners during the timeslot (Inglis 1983: 240).

The marginal position of women's programming -- at the same time as the medium's increasing centrality in everyday life, and women's increasing economic and social power -- provides evidence of continued anxieties on the part of the institution about how the program circulated and was received by its audience. There is a need provides a discrete case of how this notion of a gendered audience developed. The data gathered from the archival material will enable it to be tracked through its institutionalisation, and show it as marked out by a clear beginning and end. A history of this audience -- via both the program itself and texts generated by listeners -- will make for an important case study of the fragmentation and dispersal of the suburban ideal described by Spigel.

Finally, historical work provides useful comparisons with the contemporary mediascape (Turner 2002). The interdisciplinary dialogue between cultural studies and history has produced a series of important studies in recent years. Analysing the history of the consumption of recorded music, US-based cultural historians such as Morton have correctly argued that existing media industry histories have overlooked the importance of a 'sound culture', that is the everyday knowledge, experiences, goals, and expertise that formed sound recording technologies in the domestic context (2000). Similar observations could be made about how an account of historically specific 'radio culture' could offer a corrective to the policy focus of Australian media histories (which is concerned with the perhaps more easily documented regulation of culture at the expense of the trickier aspects of identification and consumption. Accounts of how radio audiences have actually contributed to change in cultural forms has are now being explored in the Australian context and the evidence they provide points to a more nuanced relationship that is understood in policy studies (Arrow, 1998).

Production/Consumption

The mid-twentieth century was a time of tremendous change in social definitions of gender roles, audience expectations, and media forms, yet the ways this transition actually played out within media texts and institutions is inadequately understood. Debates about what should replace the sessions aimed at women demonstrates that there was an intense reconsideration of the aims of the ABC and its relationship to women expressed in terms of feminist activism around media issues. This material further provides rich and valuable evidence of the dynamic relationship between media texts, producers and audiences. The 'Women's Session' is mentioned neither in the numerous historical accounts of the ABC nor in studies of Australian radio (with the exception of Inglis 1983 & Johnson 1987), in contrast with the emphasis on the Commission's key role in news and current affairs broadcasting (for example, Semmler 1981). Histories of Australian radio have focused upon either technological change, shifts in music formats (for example, Miller & Turner 2002), news and current affairs (Petersen 1993) or talkback (Bell & van Leewen 1994), without addressing radio's role as both a gendered technology and a technology of gender (de Lauretis 1987). Historical analysis of radio as a gendered cultural form allows researchers to test the hypothesis that the subject positions formed by this cultural form were indeed excessive and transformative, and that the gaps between the media text and women's everyday lives were productive of wider changes. By studying radio's address to its audience, and the audience's responses, retrospectively we can develop a clearer picture of how the interplay between gender and media is negotiated over time. It is for this reason that I wish to consider production and consumption as a nexus, rather than two separate categories as the 'circuit' model might suggest

Finally, radio research needs provides historical data that is essential to contextualising current debates about women and media consumption. Questions of the longer transformations of gender are often ignored topics in media research and pedagogy because of a lack of data and analysis. We need studies that will extend the focus of current debates on the construction of agency through media forms into the

past in ways which will be highly relevant to future assumptions about gender in censorship, ratings, technological change, and shifting patterns of media use.

Representation

There are two aspects of representation that radio research can offer to the wider field of media and communications research. The first relates to radio status in a literal 'blind spot' in media research, and the second to its own ubiquity as a medium in the background of everyday life.

Radio research also acts as a corrective to the ongoing emphasis on visuality in media and cultural studies (Miller 1992: 5). This emphasis, which appears in studies that focus on textual and discourse analysis of visual texts, as well as cultural policy studies and industry histories of image industries, has meant that radio as a field of study remains 'theoretically underdeveloped' and 'lacks a language for critical reflection and analysis' (Lewis and Booth 1989: xiii; Lewis 2000: 161). More context-sensitive and medium specific analytic tools therefore need to be developed for understanding sound broadcasting and its reception.

We also need to bring recent research on the spatiotemporal aspects of media to bear on a cultural form that explicitly sought both to organise private time and space and to gender a technology through its domestication. Radio research should seek to build on and extend the arguments of recent feminist and cultural theory which examines how relations between space and time are gendered, and how changes in these relations in turn produce new kinds of subjects (Laird, ed. 2002). By focusing on the radio audience, we can ask how women themselves negotiated their relationship to domesticity and the private sphere, rather than accepting it as a given. Women's responses to broadcasting are often expressed in terms of how the ideas discussed on the program, as well as the form in which they are discussed, speak to everyday knowledge and experiences. Further, the reception of these texts *in the home, during* an interval in daily life that was marked out as belonging to 'the woman at home' as a time apart from domestic routine, is a significant factor in determining their meaning. This key change to the temporality of everyday life points to how radio possibly contributed to a revisioning of domestic time as coeval with 'public' time and space (as the latter is signified in the other broadcasts such as concerts, news and current affairs, and parliament).

Conclusion

The Women's Sessions national audience began to decline sharply during the early 1960s, with the exception of the West Australian *Women's Session* which held its own until the departure of its long-term host Catherine King in 1965. Despite the efforts of the National Women's Advisory Committee – who described themselves as 'not made up of recipe-hounds, but of intelligent people of wide interests'⁶ – the session's timeslot was under increasing threat from other programs. Without King at its controls, even the WA Session too declined in audience share -- although audience numbers remained constant -- and was eventually replaced with a program presented

⁶ Memo from Alan Carmichael, 'Re: Proposal to cut national women's session for half-hour to quarter-

by a male announcer, called *Here Now* that broadcast 'trendy' music.⁷ When the incoming Whitlam government instigated a review of the whole notion of the session and its audience in the early 1970s, its winding up was justified in terms of a fragmentation of its primary female audience. Women were argued to no longer recognise themselves as an audience for programming identified as 'women's only', according to submissions to the ABC State advising committee in March 1973 from Mr RT Newell, then the ABC's Head of Audience. Newell presented the findings of a survey conducted in Adelaide in 1968 that 'the sessions attracting the largest number of women have MALE announcers [while] they are not called 'women's sessions' and it seems that women do not make this distinction between themselves and the rest of the community'.⁸

In 1975 a very different 'women's' program was inaugurated by the ABC, 'The Coming Out Show', which canvassed the issues of contemporary women and how they wished to lead their lives in a far more political form than had ever been contemplated by the earlier generation of women's programs. Conceptualised as a forum to expose the 'contradictions and myths that define women's everyday lives', issues of how women could combine mothering and paid work were revisited as were new issues of rape and sexual violence, sexism and inequality in the workplace and sexuality (Fell & Wenzell: 1995).

The end of the ABC 'Women's Sessions' can be seen to mark the end of the figure of the housewife as representing a coherent set of interests subsumed under a gendered cultural form (see Johnson & Lloyd forthcoming). Radio constituted itself through such programs as a means of bringing 'the world home' to the space of domesticity, but it was uneasy about in what form and to what extent this activity could be a serious disruption to the separation of the spheres of the public and the private. The 'Women's Sessions' as a site of uneasy negotiations around these issues demonstrate that the trajectory of radio research should neither end in policy nor audience research, but in the dialogue between media institutions and their reception in everyday life. This is a dialogue which is always many-sided, a fact we should not forget despite the technological form of radio as a broadcast medium.

⁷ Julie Lewis, *Papers 1944-1978*, National Library of Australia, MS 9507, Canberra, Box 7, Series 5/3, 'The Women's Session, WA: 1942 to present day', p. 2.

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