

**MANUFACTURING AUDIENCES? POLICY
AND PRACTICE IN ABC RADIO NEWS**

1983-1993

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Abstract

Manufacturing audiences? Policy and practice in ABC Radio news, 1983-1993

This thesis sheds light on the ways in which audiences are made through the relationships between organisational policy and news production practice. It explores the relationships between news practitioners' perceptions and definitions of audiences, production, and organisational policies, using the radio news service of the Australian national public broadcaster, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC). In so doing, the thesis demonstrates that production, in its institutional context, is a crucial site for the creation of audiences in the study of news journalism. In the process, it illuminates the role of public service broadcasting, in a world of digital media

The conceptual framework utilises a new approach to framing analysis. Framing has been used to examine the news "agenda" and to identify the salient aspects of news events. This thesis demonstrates ways in which framing can be used to research important processes in news production at different levels, from policy level to that of professional culture, and generate insights to the relationship between them. The accumulated evidence of the bulletin analysis - using structural and rhetorical frames of news - field observation and interviews, shows that a specific and coherent audience can be constructed as a result of newsroom work practices in combination with organisational policies.

The thesis has increased knowledge and understanding both of how news workers create images of their audiences and what the institutional factors are that influence the manufacture of audiences as they appear in the text of news bulletins.

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Introduction

The analysis of news institutions' sense of their audience is "something relatively rare in the sociology of news" (Schudson, 1989, p.276).

Definition of the problem

While there have been many studies of news making, most have been of television or newspaper production, unlike this one, which is of radio news. Also unlike this, few have been done in Australia, compared to the extensive work in Britain or the United States, especially in the 1970s and 1980s. In the decades since those studies, which were predominantly sociological, theoretical interest and research attention have turned more towards understanding the social and cultural meanings audiences make out of news (and other programs) and away from what producers do, and the meanings thereby created. Broadly speaking, this can be described as a move away from the sociology of news production and towards cultural studies of news and audiences for news. It has tended to be characterised by a change in the focus of research, from theories of production to theories of reception.

However, news producers by and large remain blissfully unaware of this shift in academic attention. They go on working to attract and satisfy audiences that they have constructed from audience research, in response to organisational policy, from intuition, from each other, and out of their texts, the bulletins themselves. In returning to the sociology of news production, this thesis is concerned specifically with the interface between institutional policies and practices, and the construction of audiences.

The **problem** is that for all our knowledge of how and why news is produced and of news texts, there has been a comparative neglect by research of two things. The first is how news workers “audience”¹, that is, create images of their audiences. The second area of relative obscurity is our understanding of what are the institutional factors that influence the calling-up of audience images as they appear in the news bulletins.

Studies of what news workers do have in general been neglectful of the audience, which has had “a kind of phantom existence that the sociological study of news production has yet to consider in its theoretical formulations” (Schudson 1996, p.156). Conversely, studies of what actual audiences for radio and television news do (for example by Seiter 1999, or Gunter 1987) have tended to neglect the circumstances of professional practice and organisational policy under which the news is produced. Thus, there is a discontinuity between audience studies and production studies of news, which this thesis hopes in part to redress.

It describes and analyses how different audiences are framed within radio news bulletins, reflecting network policy and newsroom practice. Accordingly, the thesis investigates the relationships between news production, the practitioners’ perceptions and definitions of audiences, and organisational policies, using the radio news service of the Australian national public broadcaster, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC). In so doing, the thesis demonstrates that production, in its institutional context, is a crucial site for the creation of audiences in the study of news journalism. Policy and practice are brought together in a way that is rare in the research literature, through a case study of how together they “manufacture” audiences.

¹ “Audience” as a verb (“audiencing”) is used by Fiske (1993) to mean being in the position of or behaving as an audience member. The thesis, however, most often uses it in the sense Tulloch appears to mean (in Alasuutari 1999, p.152), as referring to the ways in which news producers imagine their audiences.

The thesis uses a case study of attempts by ABC Radio News² over the decade 1983 to 1993 to conceptualise specific audiences for news, to match those that its radio networks were seeking to call into being. Ultimately, the separate “branding” of the radio networks succeeded and has persisted, but the tailoring of news services to those networks has not.

The timeframe of the study was a period of organisational and technological change not only for the ABC but also for other, comparable public broadcasters, in Britain and Canada. Albeit at differing periods of the timeframe, each nation experienced change, in particular around the impact of digital technologies. Over the same period, the political and economic philosophies of all three countries continued a movement, begun in the 1970s, to a contraction in government spending, which in turn put public service broadcasters under severe resource constraints.

The case study demonstrates that technological change and related policy decisions on the one hand offered the opportunity to call differentiated audiences into being through “tailored” news bulletins. On the other hand this opportunity contended with reduced funding and established production practices. The thesis develops the argument that the result was a kind of “struggle” over audiences.

This argument is developed through chapters on the history of ABC Radio news production in policy and practice, and of the ABC’s radio networks. Another chapter provides a detailed examination of differences between radio news bulletins on two networks. Throughout there is critical examination of the assumptions of radio producers about their audiences, and of the extent to which news producers are also audiences for both news and non-news

² The thesis uses “News” with the first letter capitalised when referring to the department within the ABC, but a lower case “n” when referring to the genre.

programming on the stations they work for. The thesis also takes account of the conceptual frameworks of radio news journalism in the context of the national public broadcaster's history, policies and professional work practices.

A chapter-by-chapter outline of the thesis is provided in the final section of this Introduction, following the aims and objectives of the thesis, a description of the radio networks, and news bulletin types.

Aim and objectives of the thesis

News journalism, public service broadcasting and the medium of radio are all the subjects of this thesis through consideration of the problems they face: radio as a medium neglected by research, the continued justification for publicly-funded commercial-free broadcasting, and the contemporary identity of news as distinct from other kinds of programming. The concept that here binds these problems together is that of audience-making (Ettema and Whitney 1994, Alasuutari 1999).

The **aim** of this thesis is therefore to investigate the ways in which audiences are made through the relationships between organisational policy and news production practice.

In pursuit of the main aim, the thesis has a number of subsidiary **objectives**. These are:

1. To discuss the dilemma at the heart of public broadcasting in its relationship with its audiences, the implications of that relationship for adaptation in policies and practice to cultural and technological change, and the specific implications for broadcast news journalism. The thesis uses ABC Radio in the late 1980s and early 1990s, part of a

period of technological and organisational change for the Australian national public broadcaster, as a case study to explore:

- The argument (made by Johnson, 1988 and Tracey, 1998) that the inherent and unresolvable tension for public broadcasters is the simultaneous requirement that they be for all the people of a nation (an egalitarian ideal) and that they represent the highest quality in broadcasting (an elitist and inherently conservative approach).
- The solution to this problem for ABC radio network managers (program policy makers), which was to tailor the form and content of each network so as to call up different audiences for each.
- The dilemma peculiar to the news service of a public broadcaster. The meaning of the public service news bulletin may be described as the moment at which the broadcaster speaks to the nation (Tracey, 1998, p.270). It does so in a closed and mechanistic form (the news bulletin, marked off from other kinds of program with its distinguishing features of introductory fanfare, dispassionate reader voice and sequence of discrete items). This form and its meaning make it hard for public service news to adapt to changes in popular culture that are affecting the relationship between news and audiences in other, mainly commercial, media.
- The difficulties for public service news journalism of tailoring news to different assumed audiences, because it holds to an ideal or normative framework, which assumes that “news is news” (McQuail, 1992).

- The implications of changes in news journalism, in form and content, on radio, television and the Internet, for the ABC as a public service broadcaster, for journalism as a profession and for the communication relationship between journalists and their audiences.

2. To analyse institutional methods of audience construction and the theories underlying them. The thesis engages with:

- the discursive construction of audience, not only in the discourse of news but also in what producers say about their audiences;
- empirical constructions of audience, mainly from ratings and qualitative survey data conducted by or on behalf of the organisation; and
- ways in which these constructions of audience are manifest in organisational policy and day-to-day production practice.

3. To examine the ‘common-sense’ understandings held by producers and policy makers about their audiences. The thesis argues:

- that producers of radio and television programs - whether of news or other kinds of program - operate with varying levels of awareness of audience research. The important point for the purpose of this study is that they usually believe they know what their audience wants and does not want (Schlesinger 1978; Tuchman 1978; Gans 1980; Tulloch 1990);
- that producers also work within frameworks of policy - editorial policy, network policy, corporate policy - which is

generally imposed on them by managers, who are influenced by, among other things, the need to attract audiences;

- that the intersections between policy and practice contribute to constructions of the audience; and
- that network managers (policy) and news producers (practice) struggle over constructions of audience; that is, each may be attempting the manufacture of a different audience: for non-news network programming and for news, respectively.

The research was conducted using a triangulation approach to method, employing participant observation, textual analysis and in-depth, unstructured interviewing. Method is discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

The achievements of this study are threefold:

The first is that the case study offers a uniquely detailed descriptive and analytical account of ABC radio news production processes in this period, and the ways in which they were determined by editorial policies, network structures, changes in technologies, and views of producers, including consideration of audience.

The second outcome, and the primary focus of the thesis, is to show that audience construction occurs not just through actual text, nor via the production process, but through both *in combination with organisational policy*. It is the bringing together of all these sites at which “manufacturing audiences” occurs that is the principle contribution of the thesis to theoretical analyses of audience creation. Finally, this work makes a case for the importance of publicly funded, editorially independent broadcasting, and for the value to a democratic society of retaining a commitment to its maintenance.

The main parameters of the case study are the ABC Radio networks and the radio news bulletin types. These are described in the following sections.

The ABC radio networks: differentiating the “brand image”.

The starting point of the thesis is the creation of five domestic ABC Radio networks distinct from one another in sound and format and intended audiences, which began in earnest following the Dix Report³. By the early nineties, the years in which research for this thesis was conducted, each network had a clear ‘brief’. While the thesis looks at news on only two of these radio networks, it is important they be understood in the context of the differentiation that took place across all of them. As an illustration, the following descriptions are taken from an ABC presentation kit published towards the completion of this process - of developing distinct network identities - in January 1994. This kit was produced for key stakeholders, including senior ABC managers, as well as State and Federal politicians.

Metropolitan Stations

Consisting of eight AM and one FM transmitters at radio stations in Australia’s largest population centres, “Metro Radio” describes itself thus (using the original layout of the presentation kit):

Your local station is
 what your city is thinking
 saying
 and doing.
 It delivers radio which is:
 local distinctive intelligent
 contemporary and fun
 balanced
 interactive
 companionable

³ Dix (1981). [Committee of Review of the Australian Broadcasting Commission] *The ABC in Review: National Broadcasting in the 1980s*. See also ABC (1985). *ABC achievement and the implementation of Dix, 1983-1985*. ABC: Sydney.

authoritative
non-commercial.

Regional Radio

As at January 1994, this network consisted of seventy-four AM and one hundred and ninety-six FM transmitters, serving small towns and cities and remote settlements with programs made and broadcast from more than forty regional radio stations. It was described as follows:

Regional Radio is the major provider of quality, information-based radio for regional Australians and -

- is an active and highly valued part of the regional community;
- is distinctively regional, enjoyable, accessible and companionable;
- makes the most productive use possible of its resources, producing programs of a high standard of presentation and production;
- recognises and responds to the cultural and occupational diversity of the regional audience, its interests and concerns;
- breaks news, initiates discussion and is a leader in the analysis of issues relevant to the regional community;
- is committed to the ABC standards of independence, accuracy, balance and fairness.

Radio National

This is a national network, which began with transmitters only in the eight major population centres. Under the Second Regional Radio Network (SRRN) project to extend choice to regional and rural listeners, the network had expanded by 1994 to eighteen AM and one hundred and ninety-two FM transmitters, with more planned to open. Radio National programs were made predominantly in Sydney and Melbourne, with fewer programs and staff in other capital cities. This is its 1994 description:

Radio National seeks to provide a unique service which gives the Australian Community access to the world of social, cultural, political and economic ideas. It includes analysing, enquiring and provoking debate about 'why' and not simply 'what'.

This uniqueness will be maintained and enhanced by ensuring that the range and depth of specialist coverage (including Science, Arts, Education, Law, Religion, Women's Issues, International Affairs) is greater than any other media outlet.

Radio National aims to stimulate and entertain listeners, strengthening their curiosity and helping them to make sense of an increasingly complex world, through its programs.

Radio National programs will explore the capabilities of the radio medium itself and have the highest possible ethical and production standards.

ABC Fine Music

This service was renamed ABC Classic FM in 1995, on the appointment of a new network general manager. As at January 1994 it had fifty-six FM transmitters.

ABC Fine Music as a major cultural force across Australia aims to:

- entertain, inform and engage listeners by delivering accessible and enjoyable programs to all age groups all over Australia;
- deliver classical music, jazz, drama, features and news in a way that is balanced, friendly, companionable, and which reflects the interests of all Australians;
- focus attention on Australian composition and performance (including radio-relevant commissions);
- be a showcase for Australian concerts and classical music festivals.

Triple J

This network had FM coverage in nine major cities in January 1994 with plans in place to expand into regional centres on twenty new FM transmitters by the end of that year, with further expansion through to 1996 to a total of fifty-three transmitters.

Triple J is an entertaining, innovative and accessible voice for young Australians -

- forging a broad musical identity, giving emphasis to new and emerging music and artists including live performance by broadcasting at least 35% Australian music content annually;
- leading and contributing to the expression of youth culture, encouraging freedom of opinion and artistic endeavour;
- presenting independent, accurate news and challenging information in a global context.

Thus it can be seen that there were three “national” networks: Radio National, ABC Fine Music and Triple J, and two “local” networks: Metropolitan and Regional Radio. Radio National, Metro Radio and Regional Radio are all talk-based. However, clear differences are obvious from reading the network descriptions. The two networks of particular interest to this thesis are Metro Radio and Radio National.

The Metropolitan network of stations is described in the language of advertising. It addresses a single listener (“you”, “your city”) with a list of adjectives chosen with the aim of conveying a feel for “your” station and what it offers. In comparison, Radio National’s self-description is longer, conveying a sense of its own importance to the nation (note the capital letters: “Science, Arts...”), weightier altogether. It is also the only description to speak of “the Australian Community”, rather than “all Australians” for example; there is an assumption of a cohesive national identity. This, together with the specialist nature of its programs, reveals that of the ABC’s services including Television, it is Radio National that can claim to fulfil most of the corporation’s Chartered⁴ obligations. It also suggests the closest conformity with the traditional “Reithian” model of public

⁴ The functions and duties that the Australian Federal Parliament has given to the ABC are set out in the Charter of the Corporation, found in Sections 6(1) and(2) of the *Australian Broadcasting Corporation Act 1983*.

service broadcasting, with all the promise and problems that such a model entails⁵.

As the case study reveals, differences between the major news bulletins on each of these two networks in 1991 and 1993 reflected the contrasts between their self-descriptions. About three years after these network descriptions were written, Radio National and Triple J closely followed ABC Television programs *Behind the News* and *Hot Chips* in the first expansion of the ABC on to the Internet (Martin 1999, p.106). Triple J's commitment to innovation and youth culture made it an obvious candidate to embrace a relatively new medium, while the World Wide Web could overcome the transience of radio and offer a permanent online home to the sheer volume and diversity of content generated by Radio National.

What is missing from the list of networks quoted above is the Parliamentary and News Network (PNN), with its NewsRadio service, launched in October 1994. In the 1994-95 Annual Report, the ABC introduces this network under the heading "Leadership in News and Information" and describes it thus:

The introduction of the ABC NewsRadio service on the Parliamentary and News Network (PNN) further strengthened ABC Radio's position as Australia's leading provider of news and information. ABC NewsRadio provides a continuous news service on PNN when Parliament is not sitting. It provides a unique service of rolling news and live coverage of newsworthy events. (ABC, 1995b, p.36)

While NewsRadio was not in existence during the period of the research, it is a significant development in terms of the fate of tailored news bulletins on Radio National and Metropolitan radio stations. The

⁵ John Reith, the first Director-General of the BBC, is credited with creating a model for public service broadcasting with the threefold aim of information, education and entertainment. The problem lies in narrow and elitist assumptions made about what audiences "need", which was seen as superior to what audiences might "want" to hear and see.

shortwave international service, Radio Australia, is also omitted here, since it is not relevant to this study. The case study is confined to a comparison of selected news bulletins on the Metropolitan and Radio National networks because of their similarities as talk-based networks with overlapping audiences, and because the national bulletins for both were produced from the same newsroom, reasons discussed in detail in the next chapter.

ABC Radio produced three different types of news bulletin during the period of the case study. Each of these has different implications for news priorities, bulletin structure and story choice; as a result each produces a different set of meanings, a different view of the world and what is important in it, for the audience. It is important to an understanding of what was studied to identify the differences between the bulletin types.

Bulletin types: definition of terms.

The pattern of bulletins at the time of the thesis research was markedly different on each network. The following terms will recur throughout the thesis.

- A COMPOSITE bulletin is one written in a state newsroom (or, at the time of the research, at the state 'desk' in the Sydney newsroom) and uses the major State-originated stories to lead the bulletin, with national and international news following (unless of course the biggest news story of the day happens to be either national or international). The purpose of the composite is specifically to enable news producers to offer to listeners their local news first; the assumption being that people want their 'backyard' news before news of the nation, or the world.
- NATIONAL news means a bulletin produced in the Sydney newsroom, which at the time of my research, was also called 'the

national newsroom'. A national bulletin may contain international, national or state-based news stories, but the first two tend to predominate.

- STATE news means a bulletin produced in a State newsroom, in which local news predominates and which, on the Metropolitan network, usually concludes with some sports news, and a weather forecast.

Metropolitan stations run News on the hour, most of it in what is called the "composite" format. By contrast, Radio National news bulletins were not only more widely spaced but also predominantly of a different type. In 1987, Radio National ran a daily average of 97 minutes of news, only 31 minutes of it in the Composite format, while Metropolitan stations ran 145 minutes of news, of which 116 was Composite bulletins. Almost all of Radio National's news was thus of the National-plus-State format (ABC Inter-Office Memorandum, April 19, 1990). The effect for listeners of the National-State format is to bring them national and international news first, followed - up to 10 minutes later - by local (State-based) news.

In February 1992, Radio National changed the news schedule. The 7.15am bulletin was moved to 7 o'clock, and bulletins on the hour were introduced throughout the day, as there were on Metros. However, these were National bulletins, not Composites. Thus the focus on Radio National remained on national and international news predominating over local news - in contrast to the news priorities of the Metropolitan network. The argument, elucidated in later chapters, is that this reflects assumptions not only about the role of the Radio National network for ABC Radio, but also about the nature of the audience constructed for this network.

Outline of the thesis

Chapter One describes in detail the background, theory and methods of the thesis, including the decision to focus on the main breakfast bulletin from two out of the ABC's six radio networks and the use of participant observation.

This research was undertaken while I was working as a newsreader for ABC Radio and later while I was both reading and producing some breakfast bulletins and holding a management position in the Radio National network. In this chapter I argue that my "insider status" in the newsroom, while not wholly unproblematic, gave me a unique vantage point from which to observe and question the roles and values of the bulletin producers in ABC Radio's national newsroom in Sydney. My privileged access to documents of the period, to some of which I contributed, also provided a means of comparing and contrasting the twists and turns of policy decision-making in network management, with outcomes in newsroom practices.

Taken together, the ethnographic basis of the research and the documentary analysis provide an intriguing picture of the values informing the practices of news production in ABC Radio; and of the audience constructions made by both network managers and news bulletin producers.

Finally, the differences in these audiences are made explicit through a textual analysis of some of the news bulletins themselves, using framing theory. I have used the main or "flagship" breakfast bulletins on two contrasting networks. One network is national and based on specialist talks programs, the other local and intended to attract a general audience. The research identifies differences between the two bulletins in selected key features and suggests what audience for each

is being constructed thereby. Framing theory argues that news values inform decisions that journalists make not only about what constitutes a news story, but also about what angle to take on the story. I argue in addition that news producers' images of the audience influence, and are thus created in, the framing of the news.

Chapter Two surveys the literature analysing news values and news production, as well as approaches to audiences. It examines what identifies news as a distinct form of production, in terms of shared understandings among news workers and between news producers and their audiences. Moving through a survey of the foundational sociological studies of news to an examination of “news culture”, this chapter develops an argument for the construction of audiences both textually and institutionally. It thus relates framing theory to news values.

Chapter Three establishes the institutional context of the case study, through a brief history of news production within the organisational structure of the ABC. This chapter demonstrates that News was first established as an entirely separate division, then combined with Current Affairs into separate radio and television departments. Through subsequent changes to the organisational structure of the ABC, news and current affairs always remain “quarantined” from other kinds of program commissioning and production.

This placing apart emphasises the high organisational value placed on the independence of news, not only editorially but also from the organisational imperatives that make non-news programs more changeable, more susceptible to pressure to be “audience responsive”.

News has historically been given larger and more protected budgets in times of funding pressure on the ABC. Radio news is “privileged discourse” within the audio medium: for example, it is heralded by loud, fanfare-like or urgent music, and it usually also heralds the hour,

beginning at “the top of the clock”, a privileged position in the way radio segments time. Such features indicate its immediacy, and its urgent intrusion into other radio sound signifies its importance.

The chapter concludes with a consideration of changes to non-news programming, and how these affected the news service. These were changes that began in the years following the publication in 1981 of the report of the Committee of Review of the (then) Australian Broadcasting Commission, set up by the Federal Government and known as the Dix Report, after the name of the Committee’s chairman, businessman Alex Dix. These changes assumed the attraction or creation of distinct audiences for the different ABC Radio networks. It is a taken-for-granted of media production that non-news programming is tailored to create network identity or, to put it another way, to appeal to different audiences. It is not so taken-for-granted, however, particularly at the ABC, that network identity should affect news bulletins.

Chapter Four brings together the preceding three chapters, locating itself at the site of the case study, in what was at the time called the “national newsroom” of ABC Radio, in Sydney.

This chapter analyses differences in production practices and how they affected the “flagship” breakfast bulletins on Radio National and on the Metropolitan network. An enduring culture becomes apparent; a set of values, assumptions and production practices in ABC Radio News that has persisted through changes to the technology of news production, training and organisational structures. This news culture bears resemblances to that identified across the sociological literature described in Chapter Two, and shows some elements peculiar to public sector broadcasting in general and to ABC News in particular, as identified in Chapter Three.

This chapter introduces the differences between the bulletins as resulting not only from differences in the work practices employed in their production of the bulletins but also from differences in perceptions of the audience for each network. These and other key differences are taken up in the detailed analysis of the bulletin texts, in Chapter Five.

Chapter Five analyses in detail differences between the Radio National and Metropolitan radio breakfast bulletins in story writing, story choice and order, for their revelation of constructions of audiences; and these are considered in the light of what bulletin producers say about the audience for each network.

This chapter introduces a conceptual model of framing theory, which is defined and discussed in the opening section of the chapter. The chapter concludes that framing analysis clearly demonstrates the creation of different audiences for each of the Metropolitan and Radio National bulletins.

Chapter Six brings together the findings of the research and analysis to argue that it was impossible to sustain a unified attempt to “manufacture” distinct audiences for the ABC Radio News service. It was doomed to founder on a number of factors that are together described as a struggle over audiences. The sources of the struggle and the influences upon its course include the inherent contradiction in the audience obligations of the ABC, exacerbated by successive reductions in funding. Perhaps stronger even than these influences, however, were the professional norms and work practices of ABC radio news producers.

A key factor in the eventual abandonment of the attempt to tailor news on each of its network services was the ABC’s move to establish a 24-hour news service, NewsRadio, on the Parliamentary and News Network. More recently, ABC News Online has become an important

and growing news service, leaving a standardised and, it is argued, impoverished news service on the Metropolitan and Radio National networks.

The fragmentation of services made possible by technology, and the impact of globalisation, may be seen as a dual threat: to notions of professionalism in production and to the idea of a national, public broadcaster. However, these same features of the contemporary mediascape may also offer a way out of the historical dilemma for the ABC in its relationship with its audiences.

The thesis concludes in with a summary of its key argument, that research must restore production as a crucial site for the creation of audiences in the study of news journalism. This research establishes a conceptual framework for the identification of such audiences, using framing, thus reconciling the centrality of production with theories of audience creation.