Snow Falling on Bega: early television reception on the Far South Coast of New South Wales.

Stephanie Hanson
Student ID: 2337927
ARTS412
Abstract:

Although by the end of 1956 both Sydney and Melbourne could boast two commercial stations and the ABC, outside of these major capital cities - particularly across rural Australia - access to the new technology was limited. This project focuses specifically on one relatively isolated rural region, the Far South Coast of New South Wales, where despite intense political lobbying precipitated by public outrage residents experienced a fourteen-year time lapse from the first demonstration of television at an agricultural show in 1957 and the commencement of reliable coverage in November 1971. Newspaper sources have been used to construct a chronology of significant events and to identify the geographic and socio/political factors that hampered television access throughout the region. A preliminary assessment of how the delay impacted upon the community’s sense of identity and self-worth and its relationship to the nation as a whole has also been undertaken. The experience of Far South Coast residents challenges the dominant impression that television “came to Australia” in September 1956, then spread rapidly across the country quickly evolving into a pervasive, nation-shaping cultural force. Rather than promoting national unity, the sub-standard television service on offer to this rural populace exacerbated both the community’s sense of inferiority and its hostility towards city-based, city-biased government institutions, their representatives and urban dwellers more generally. The report highlights the inequity of provision that has historically distinguished metropolitan from rural Australia and demonstrates the need for further research which takes into account the diversity within the experience of television across time and place.
Abbreviations:

ABC: Australian Broadcasting Commission
ABCB: Australian Broadcasting Control Board
ACT: Australian Capital Territory
BTA: Broadcasting and Television Act, 1953
FSC: Far South Coast
MHR: Member of House of Representatives
MP: Member of Parliament
NSW: New South Wales
PMG: Postmaster-general’s Department
Snow Falling on Bega: early television reception on the Far South Coast of New South Wales.

Television has had an amazing impact on Australian society…it is now part and parcel of everyday Australian life, but if one takes the time to reflect on what this medium brings to our lives… the impact is enormous.\(^1\)


I wonder if the Postmaster-general has ever had to fill in the night hours of the winter, miles from anywhere, on a lonely country station homestead, knowing full well that the people of the near city areas are sitting up enjoying their television.\(^i\)


2006 was a year of some moment for the television industry and affiliated government and media bodies: the nation celebrated 50 years of television broadcasting. The Australian populace apparently greeted television with enthusiasm from its first telecast in September 1956. It is important to bear in mind, however, that although by the end of that year both Sydney and Melbourne could boast two commercial stations and the ABC, outside of these major capital cities access to the new technology was limited.\(^iii\) Broadcasting did not commence in Brisbane, Adelaide and Perth until 1959 and for other regions across the nation - in particular rural Australia - television was to remain a distant although much sought after dream for many years.\(^iv\) Despite intense political lobbying precipitated by public outrage, the Far South Coast of NSW experienced a fourteen-year delay from when television was first exhibited at the Bega Show in 1957 and the commencement of reliable television coverage in November 1971. Whilst investigation into the asymmetrical spread of television across rural and metropolitan regions experienced in the USA has recently begun, to date there has been no significant research on the subject conducted in Australia.\(^v\)

The problems associated with researching and writing a theorized history of Australian television are discussed by Liz Jacka in her 2004 article "Doing the History of Television in Australia: Problems and Challenges." Jacka recognizes the need for empirically based research that reflects the attitudes and policies of the period under scrutiny from which theories can be formulated.\(^vi\) She puts forward suggestions for historical studies pertaining to Australian television that could make a significant contribution to the field. These include television and national and cultural identity;
power and control within the industry; television and politics; regional television and the relationship between television and other media and cultural forms over time. However, as she observes "it is difficult to do a theorized history of something as complex and as pervasive as television when the basic historical materials do not exist."vii She notes that whilst Australian media scholars have undertaken valuable studies dealing with different aspects of television these investigations primarily focus on contemporary issues and concerns.

Notable exceptions to this trend include Ann Curthoys’ "The Getting of Television" in Better Dead than Red: Australia's First Cold Warviii and Terry Flew’s chapter ‘Television and pay TV’ in The Media and Communications in Australia.ix Curthoys presents a detailed historical study that identifies the key events, debates and political ideologies that underpinned broadcasting policy and foreshadowed the introduction of television to Australia. The form of television service adopted and the comparatively late arrival of the medium to the nation, she contends, was to a large extent a consequence of the “cold war” fears of the times.x Flew’s research complements Curthoys’ work addressing the historical development of Australian television from the 1950s until the turn of the 21st century. Topics explored include the ongoing development of the industry; changes to broadcasting policy, patterns of ownership, programming; audience demographics as well as the introduction and likely impact of Pay TV. Whilst in combination these authors present a thorough chronological account of the topic from the earliest debates on television, to its inception and into the present era, neither has assessed how different groups within the population encountered television or how their experiences may have differed according to place. However, as O’Regan makes clear in his contemporary account of television across the nation, Australian Television Culture, "Given Australia's poly-ethnic society, the geographic dispersal of television markets, and the different television environments across the country, it is important to allow for the internal diversity of the Australian experience of television."xii

This short project has begun to address this deficit by focusing specifically on one relatively isolated rural region, the Far South Coast of New South Wales (NSW) between 1962 and 1971 when television, although available to residents, was rendered unwatchable as a result of intermittent and poor quality reception. Newspaper sources
have been used to construct a chronology of significant events (Appendix 1) and to identify the geographic and socio/political factors that hampered reliable television coverage in the region. A preliminary assessment of how the delay impacted upon the community’s sense of identity and self-worth and its relationship to the nation as a whole was also undertaken.

The Far South Coast is located at the southern extreme of NSW approximately midway between Melbourne and Sydney. This coastal strip covers an area from Bermagui in the north to the Victorian border in the south, with the Great Dividing Range marking its western boundary. (Appendices 2 & 3) The region’s distance from the state capital Sydney, a profusion of west/east flowing waterways, as well as its rugged and mountainous terrain have historically limited transport and communications options, isolating its inhabitants and hindering the growth and prosperity of the district.xii According to geographer Bruce Ryan, "In short, unlike much of coastal southeastern Australia, the South Coast confronted pioneer settlers not only with a refractory environment of scant resources, but also with a barrier to inland access which cooled their economic aspirations and has defied intensive development ever since."xiii Residents, nevertheless, were optimistic about television access, it being “widely recognised that a TV picture will travel long distances over water.”xiv The first recorded purchase of a private television in the district took place in Eden in October 1958 with the expectation that signals could be readily received from Sydney. A second set was bought soon after and more purchases were predicted to follow. It soon however became apparent that local hopes had once again been foiled by distance and terrain: televisions were reported to be “unwatchable for most of the time.”xv

In August 1959 representatives from the region’s three local government areas, Mumbulla Shire, Bega Municipality and Imlay Shire, formed a regional television committee to press for the claims of the Far South Coast when new stations were allocated.xvi Under the guidelines of the dual system of broadcasting rural dwellers could expect to have access to the national service and at least one commercial station. Residents were therefore disappointed when in 1961 an application received by the ABCB for the establishment of a local commercial station did not proceed because of doubts as to its economic viability. Feelings of frustration intensified when
the PMG announced that transmitters for both the Canberra commercial station and the ABC were to be situated on Black Mountain in the ACT rather than Cooma, as proposed by Mr. Allan Fraser (MHR). This site lacked the elevation required to provide coverage to the high altitude areas of the Bega-Cooma television district.xvii

Local expectations were revived in February 1962 when The Magnet and The Voice proclaimed, “TV may soon become a reality on the FSC”: WIN, channel 4 Wollongong would commence transmission to the Illawarra and South Coast within the month.xviii & xix At 6.00pm on the 18th March 1962, crowds congregated in front of Bega’s three electrical retail outlets to witness WIN’s inaugural telecast from televisions placed in shop windows, with sound being amplified by speakers into the street. The Bega District News reported that “sound was remarkably good throughout the evening and the picture remained good most of the time… reports from many districts also told of good reception.”xx However, within the same article it was observed that: “Sunday night was not classed as a good night for television at centres distant from the transmitters. Better reception is expected from time to time.xx” For some residents at least, television was finally a “reality” if only in a limited way. Over the ensuing months however, numerous complaints were received of ghosting, snow, fading or intermittent signals and “dead spots”, in some instances covering entire towns and villages, where television could not be received at all. This situation was clearly unsatisfactory and the television committee, community groups and retailers, with the co-operation of local State and Federal parliamentary representatives, worked tirelessly to ensure that residents received what was clearly perceived to be a right – a choice of viewing options received with a reasonable degree of clarity. By March 1966, even the PMG was forced to concede that the people from Bega-Cooma “are being deprived of the enjoyment of television”xxii

The major factors contributing to the problem of television access to the region are readily identifiable. In the first instance the Far South Coast was situated out of the 150 – 200 mile range of “normally accepted service areas of the stations” the closest being in Wollongong and Traralgon (Victoria). (Appendix 4) The PMG advised that even with adjustments to aerials no appreciable improvement could be expected.xxiii The most obvious way around this all too familiar problem was to have programmes transmitted or relayed from within the district. The principle difficulty in this strategy,
as the PMG was quick to point out, related to the relatively small population and the consequent limits in potential revenue for commercial stations and in the case of the national service, the high cost of provision per head of population. Residents were guaranteed that a Bega-Cooma national station would be established however as this event was not scheduled to take place until 1966/67 this assurance gave “no immediate hope to viewers in area.”24 A local deputation to the PMG expressed the opinion that a relay of Channel 7 Canberra from Brown Mountain, west of Bega “was the only other way of ensuring clear TV reception for everyone in the area.” In a further setback the PMG refused this request arguing that the influence of the Fairfax interests would be overly extended thus furthering television monopoly.25

Of all the impediments that stood between residents and a reliable television service none enraged the community as much as the legislative restrictions of the Broadcasting and Television Act (BTA), particularly as anti-monopoly laws appeared to have little relevance to a region that had no service whatsoever.26 As Fraser (MHR) attempted to explain to the PMG: “Monopoly was bad only where it injured the public interest, certainly not where it would promote the public interest as in this case.”27 He proposed that Bega-Cooma be included in the Canberra region for commercial television purposes thus circumventing issues arising from the BTA.28 When this suggestion was denied Fraser called for “suitable amendments to be made to the anti-monopoly provisions of the Broadcasting and Television Act so as to provide for exceptional cases such as the Bega-Cooma area and permit an existing commercial company to extend its television services into such an area where no other commercial company has considered it worthwhile to operate a station.”29 This move was also disallowed prompting State parliamentary member J. Mauger (MP) to call for the assistance of the NSW Premier, Robert Askin:

Thirty thousand people in this area are deprived of the enjoyment of television so necessary in the life of people in country areas...It is ten years since television was introduced in this county and still these people cannot expect to get commercial television in the foreseeable future.30

On June 29 1966 the long awaited national station ABSN-8 servicing the South Coast, the Southern Tablelands and the Monaro was finally brought on air.31 It was the 35th of 39 national stations to be established in country areas throughout the Commonwealth. Local dealers reported a strong demand for sets prior to the event
and expected a rush once the station opened “and good reception proven.”xxxii The community, however, was once again to be disappointed. Whilst some residents were receiving “a very good to almost perfect picture” a great percentage had “very mediocre reception with “snow” and “ghosting” spoiling the picture.”xxxiii In an attempt to remedy this situation ABSN-8 programmes were translated from Wollongong rather than Canberra, a move that not only proved to be of minimal benefit but also further displeased the already inflamed populace who argued that they had “no affinity with Wollongong and Sydney, but do have close ties with the Federal Capital.”xxxiv A petition was quickly organised to protest against the programme changes; viewers experiencing poor reception were urged to fill in an interference complaint form; retailers submitted a joint complaint to the PMG and Fraser demanded an “expert” officer be sent from the ABCB to investigate the situation. “We have waited too long for clear TV in this part of the world to settle for anything less now.”xxxv

The community’s persistence appeared to have paid off when, in August 1967, the Bega District News announced that WIN TV would build a translator station on Mumbulla Mountain on the completion of a forestry road to the summit.xxxvi However another two years of intense lobbying passed before the ABCB recommended the granting of a licence and the community was forewarned that further delays should be anticipated. The PMG reaffirmed that:

He was well aware of the inadequacies in TV reception in this area but investigations have shown that there are problems, both technical and as to costs associated with the provision of improved services… the FSC area of NSW is only one of a considerable number of areas throughout the Commonwealth, which, unfortunately, do not have satisfactory TV available to them, and which necessitate investigations by the Board.xxxvii

(The Voice Sept 4 1969)

As it transpired WIN Channel 6 did not go to air until November 1971, the delay reportedly a consequence of ongoing technical problems. However, in an uncharacteristic stroke of good fortune signals that were expected to provide coverage to the northern end of the region only were also generally well received across the Imlay Shire in the south. Whilst problems with reception continued and continue to occur across the region particularly in the summer months the general consensus was that finally, fifteen years after the first telecasts in Sydney and Melbourne, television had arrived on the Far South Coast.xxxviii
In our enthusiasm to explore, explain and theorize the complex relationship between media technologies and society it is easy to overlook communities who have been or are partially or fully excluded from the products and effects of technological progress. The Far South Coast of NSW (locally referred to as The Forgotten Corner) has long complained of neglect by successive Federal and State governments particularly in terms of their failure to provide the infrastructures associated with transport and communication. This sense of abandonment has often developed into a general suspicion of and antipathy towards city dwellers more generally. In their assessment of the 1955 Federal and 1956 State election campaigns in Eden-Monaro, Rawson and Holtzinger have written “The South Coast considers itself the victim of discrimination in favour not only of Sydney, but of practically all the rest of the State.”³⁹ The long delays in receiving a satisfactory television service fueled standing resentments exacerbating both the community’s sense of inferiority and its hostility towards city-based and seemingly city biased government institutions and their representatives. For example in June 1965 Fraser (MHR) wrote:

> It is really intolerable that country people should have to go year after year without the amenity of television which city people enjoy simply by pressing a button.⁴¹

The PMG’s unsympathetic stance towards the plight of the region was also keenly felt and strongly criticised:

> People are most incensed by the callous action of the Minister in his total disregard for the need to supply this modern amenity to the 33,000 people in the area to be served.⁴²

City-based tourists whose behaviour at times appeared arrogant to local residents also caused affront. The following anecdote was printed in the *Bega District News* shortly after the first television transmission to the district.

> The crowds assembled outside the three stores stopped a passing car whose occupants were Sydney residents and when these travellers raced to see what was afoot came back thoroughly disappointed – it was only TV. It’s all a matter of opinion after all!⁴³

Anthropologist Brian Larkin notes in his recent study on media piracy in Nigeria that while media infrastructure creates a sense of connectedness to a globalised world it simultaneously emphasizes the marginalisation of those communities who must contend with ongoing technological breakdown.⁴⁴ The reactions of Far South Coast residents to their inadequate television service clearly demonstrates this point and serves as a reminder that any assessment of technology and its impact on society must...
take into account the unequal distribution of the product and its related services and infrastructures as well as the diversity of regions.

This report has not attempted to present a theorized historical account of the early years of television on the Far South Coast, however the data has revealed many areas where such an approach could be beneficial. The inadequacies of the local television service was but one of many technological shortcomings encountered by residents as a consequence of the uneven development and inequity of provision that has historically distinguished metropolitan from rural Australia. Oral interviews could provide insight into how this exclusion from what has been described as “the most widely used mass media form in Australia and in the world” has impacted upon the community and to what extent this perceived neglect has contributed to the “Forgotten Corner” outlook of the region’s long term residents. The PMG’s repeated assertion that similar reception conditions applied to many parts of rural Australia indicates that the setbacks faced by Far South Coast residents in their attempts to gain television access were not atypical. A comparative analysis of how different settlements across the nation and/or the various sub-groups within those communities reacted to either the lack of television or technological breakdown could also make a valuable contribution to the field.

The report also demonstrates how research which focuses primarily on cultural artefacts such as television can draw attention to much broader social issues and concerns. The long delay resulting from the anti-monopoly component of the BTA, for example, highlights how legislative arrangements that are targeted towards predominantly metropolitan problems can be detrimental to rural communities. It is not surprising that the political representatives of rural electorates have approached subsequent amendments to media policy with extreme caution. The Far South Coast residents’ insistence on maintaining historical connections to the Monaro by claiming a cultural affinity with Canberra rather than with the NSW administrative centres of Wollongong and Sydney, is also interesting in terms of the formation and preservation of communal identity and warrants further investigation. Quite clearly this short report has raised more issues than it has been able to address, however given the paucity of collated data on television in the region, this was anticipated. As Jacka explains: "It may be that in the first stage of the iterations of historical research this is
how one has to start even though it is not where one will end up.\textsuperscript{xlvii} The selected research approach, which was essentially to present a chronology and description of the events surrounding the introduction of television to the district as reflected through the press discourses of the time has by no means provided an exhaustive account of the topic; it has however presented the foundations from which a more detailed interpretive study can proceed.


\textsuperscript{2} Mauger (MP) in \textit{The Magnet & The Voice}, 11 November 1965.

\textsuperscript{iii} “From the moment of television’s introduction in Australia in 1956, TV ownership took off quickly, reaching 80% by 1964 and 90% by 1971.” Flew, “Television and pay TV” in Cunningham & Turner (ed.), \textit{The Media and Communications in Australia}, p. 173.

\textsuperscript{iii} Mauger (MP) in \textit{The Magnet & The Voice}, 11 November 1965.

\textsuperscript{iii} Fuller-Seeley examines statistics pertaining to television ownership taken from census material, yearbooks and almanacs to offer a corrective to the notion of the “mass audience undifferentiated by class, gender race or geographic location” and to highlight the uneven distribution of television, particularly between urban and rural audiences, in its first decade. (p.1) Her findings indicate that early television audiences (late 1940s to early 1950s) were overwhelmingly white, urban and middle class. A number of factors contributed to this situation, including the cost of television sets, signal allocation plans which privileged metropolitan and urban centres and in some regions, religious values and practices that discouraged the use of the mass media. By the middle of the 1960s, however, this disparity had all but disappeared with 90% of all Americans owning a television set. In order “to learn more about the impact of TV (and the lack of TV) on American society and culture” Fuller-Seeley calls for further research focusing on the post-war period when access to television was clearly unequal. (p. 7) Fuller-Seeley, Kathy. \textit{The Video Divide: Unequal Diffusion of early US TV ownership 1945-1955}. SCuMS conference paper, delivered 2nd March 2004.


\textsuperscript{vii} ibid., pp. 27-28.


\textsuperscript{x} The Australian mixed or dual system of broadcasting was initially devised as a means of regulating the radio industry and was adapted to accommodate the emergence of television. The system comprises of a public broadcasting sector, funded and maintained by the Commonwealth and an independent commercial sector, financially supported by advertising and other forms of corporate enterprise but regulated by the state. Curthoys, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 124-125

\textsuperscript{xi} O’Regan, \textit{Australian Television Culture}, p. 2.


\textsuperscript{xiii} ibid, p.1.

\textsuperscript{xiv} \textit{The Magnet and The Voice}, 9 October 1958.
The Bega-Cooma television district consisted of most of the Eden-Monaro electorate and serviced approximately 33,000 people.

The WIN transmitter was designed to give coverage from Sydney to Bateman’s Bay and west beyond Goulburn. It was located at Knights Hill South West of Wollongong – 2550ft above sea level.

Namely Coolagolite, Bermagui, Tathra, Wolumla, Bimbaya, Candelo and Mogilla. These villages are all situated within the northern sector of the Far South Coast.

Under the Broadcasting and Television Act a single company or individual could carry no more than two licenses. Curthoys, *op. cit.*, pp. 151-154

Under the 1965 amendments to the Act Canberra Television Ltd was deemed not eligible to hold a separate licence for the Bega-Cooma area as some members of the company already held controlling interests in two established television stations. *ibid.*, 30 September 1965.

The ABCN-8 aerial was sited at an elevation 4050ft on Brown Mountain, west of Bega. Programmes were relayed from Sydney ABN channel 2 by microwave link. It was estimated that coverage would be provided to 35,000 people. *ibid.*, 16 June 1966.

Mumbulla Mountain is located to the north of Bega.

Reception across the region was further improved with the erection of the ABC transmitter on Bimmill Hill, Eden in February 1977, which has also been used by commercial stations. The recent introduction of digital television has remedied the problem of reception in most areas with all commercial and national stations being transmitted by the end of 2006.

For example the adversarial stance taken by Queensland senator Barnaby Joyce in the debates which accompanied the 2006 Media Reform Package.

Rawson & Holtzinger, *op. cit.*, p. 121.


Bibliography:


Newspapers:

Bega District News, published and printed Bega NSW, 1923 -

The Magnet and The Voice, published and printed Eden NSW, 1940 – 1969

The Voice, published and printed Eden NSW, 1969 – 1971
### Appendix 1: Chronology of Events

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>February 1957</td>
<td>First television exhibition at Bega Show</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 1959</td>
<td>Regional television committee formed to press for claims for a television service for residents of Far South Coast.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January/April 1961</td>
<td>Both the Canberra national and commercial services site their aerials on Black Mountain thus precluding access for the majority of resident of Eden-Monaro district (including the Far South Coast)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 1962</td>
<td>WIN 4 (Wollongong) commences transmission. Some residents receive signal but the majority still without a television service.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 1966</td>
<td>Local national station ABSN 8 commences transmission. Some residents receive a strong signal but for many picture and sound quality very poor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 28 1966</td>
<td>In an attempt to improve reception to the district ABSN-8 programmes translated from Wollongong rather than from Canberra. Improvement negligible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 1971</td>
<td>WIN translator established on Mumbilla Mountain providing most Far South Coast residents with a satisfactory commercial service.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 1977</td>
<td>ABC transmitter on Bimmill Hill, Eden operational. Reasonable reception received by most residents throughout region.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005-2006</td>
<td>All national and commercial stations transmitting digitally - generally well received across district.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Attachment 2: Far South Coast of New South Wales

Appendix 3: Towns and Villages of the Far South Coast of New South Wales:

Appendix 4: Location of Transmitters: