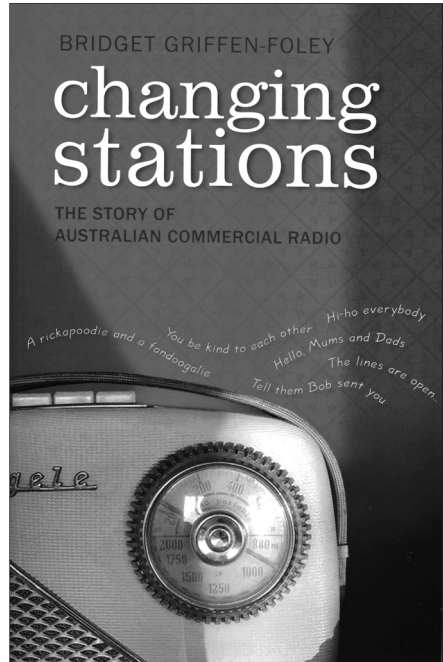


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Invaluable history amid cultural struggles

Changing stations: The story of Australian commercial radio, by Bridget Griffen-Foley. Sydney: UNSW Press, 2009, 529 pp. ISBN 978-086840-918-4 (pbk).

RADIO broadcasting started in Australia on 13 November 1923 when Sydney station 2BS (later to become 2BL) hit the airwaves. Within 12 months, government and industry had agreed to split management of Australian radio into two broad categories—A-class and B-class licences. The first category would be supported initially by listeners' subscriptions until they were nationalised in 1928. Barely four years later, it came under the control of the newly-established Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC). The B-class stations morphed into the commercial radio industry, creating a hybrid of the UK's tightly-



regulated government model and the USA's virtually unregulated market-driven approach.

This rather cursory description of the birth of Australian radio and the role played by the commercial sector in no way reflects the detailed historical analysis of commercial radio in Australia in this fine book by arguably Australia's leading media historian, Bridget Griffen-Foley. A stalwart of the current movement to document Australia's media history, Griffen-Foley has produced what surely is the definitive history of Australian commercial radio. Divided sensibly into two parts—The Industry and

The Programmes—the book charts a course through the maelstrom of government policymaking and some-time political opportunism to provide crucial context to this fascinating narrative. Griffen-Foley reminds us of a general absence of attention paid to the commercial radio sector by media scholars and provides strong evidence of the significance of this oversight.

I venture to suggest that all of us would find it impossible to recall a life without commercial radio. Often relegated to the ‘low brow’ end of the cultural spectrum, Griffen-Foley makes a strong case for the important role commercial radio has played in imagining modern Australia.

While the first section of the book focusing on the battles over regulation of the initially scarce spectrum is informative, it is the second and largest part of the book dealing with programmes and the characters that brought them to life which really shines. It is in the innumerable stories that Griffen-Foley has woven cleverly into her narrative that the real cultural worth of commercial radio is apparent. Examples range from the enormously popular radio clubs in the mid 1920s headed by such characters as ‘Uncle Frank’ and ‘Mamma Lena’, through what she terms ‘the golden age of entertainment’ in the 1930s, 40s and 50s, to commercial radio’s

stranglehold on the ‘dial-in democracy’ of talkback from the late 1960s.

As expected from a scholar of Griffen-Foley’s stature, each of the 12 substantive chapters is meticulously supported by up to one hundred footnotes along with three useful appendices covering the regulatory timeline, a list of the current 261 commercial radio licences in Australia, and a sample of programming from Sydney radio 1938-2008.

My only quibble with this history is the scant attention paid to the now burgeoning community radio sector—at last count with around 350 licences. Perhaps I am betraying my bias here but I found the absence of acknowledgement of the contribution of community radio notable, especially as it is community radio rather than the ABC that has challenged commercial radio in various spheres in the past two or three decades. As the commercial radio sector has increasingly retreated from serving its regional and remote audiences—largely for commercial reasons—it has been community radio with a watered-down form of advertising, which has stepped into the breach. Significant audiences are moving away from commercial (and ABC) radio to the community sector. Australia now has the highest per-capita listenership for community radio globally—a major

impetus for this change is commercial radio's perceived inability to engage with the nature of Australian cultural diversity. Although Griffen-Foley presents strong evidence throughout the book of the commercial sector's ability to manage this in earlier times, perhaps it is in the last two or three decades that the changing nature of Australian culture—along with technological revolution—has revealed an industry now struggling with its sense of identity. Regardless, Griffen-Foley has made an invaluable contribution to our knowledge and understanding of this crucial dimension of Australian broadcasting history.

BEING THE FIRST SOLOMON ISLANDS WOMEN IN PUBLIC LIFE



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