Proposed Paper: Ideas of culture and audience at ABC Radio National and the future of cultural radio institution as anomaly

ABSTRACT:
For more than 70 years the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s (ABC) Radio National has offered a particular version of the ‘cultural radio’* model of PSB radio to its listeners and diverse ‘users’, professionals and publics. This strand of the ABC’s ‘service’ was implicit within the ABC from its inception in 1932, but it has evolved since 1946 as a distinct form of cultural and ideas broadcasting in Australia. As such it has also been part of the development of ‘rich-mix’ (Hendy)** anti-format PSB stations internationally. However, this unique radio outlet may now be in danger of losing its distinctive place as a ‘cultural institution’ and broadcaster, as it appears to be moving towards a more narrowly and conventionally conceived ‘talk’ or ‘spoken word’ outlet. RN, as it is now known, has never just been a radio station. Its relationship to culture in its widest sense has arguably been a core driver of its content, its productions and commissioning, and possibly also has influenced the profile of its staff in the creative, journalistic and managerial aspects of its operations. Like other international ‘stations’ of similar type – BBC Radio 3/Radio 4, France Culture, or the cultural outlets of the ARD across Germany – this station/institution has aimed to contribute, through its specialist forms and content, to the cultural, creative and civic life of the nation. It has also more recently been a site for innovation in its approach to content, program forms and in its expansion into online delivery and podcasting. Historically, the ‘project’ of this network has stood it apart from the rest of the radio industry in Australia. Commercial radio, as a contrast, has always been defined by distinct formats which are narrowly attuned to their target audience demographics, and will ideally satisfy the advertisers who will then finance the content and ‘talent’ to help achieve the largest possible audiences. Audiences first and foremost here are understood as consumers who can be captured and modelled using marketing research. In the past, a core PSB radio network like RN has had a very different conception of its relationship to its audience – or, rather, its public. Audience demographics until very recently have not been a main driver of RN ambitions or programming. In this paper, I will define the form of RN within like international traditions; and touch on the very different kinds of relations this form has traditionally had with its publics and communities. I will interrogate the audience trope as it is now increasingly and unproblematically mobilized in the case of RN, exploring how the recent restructuring of the outlet may be leading to a category shift – at least in so far as this model has evolved over the life of PSB from an international and national perspective. The Australian version of this international radio form has intellectual and ethical drivers, as well as cultural ones which meant the network in the past was never limited or defined by audience demographic research or its agendas. RN evolved an understanding of its publics as listeners, not consumers, and these were curious, encouraged to open to intellectual or cultural stimulation through interaction with the programs. No matter where they lived, or their level of education they were invited to participate in the life of the nation, and in the life of ideas which the network also helped to communicate and shape.


**Brief Biography:**

VIRGINIA MADSEN is a senior lecturer in media and the Convener of radio at Macquarie University, Sydney, where she is also a member of the Centre for Media History (CMH). Her research explores cultural and public broadcasting traditions and forms. Currently, she leads a large Australian Research Council Discovery Project, 'Cultural Conversations: A History of ABC Radio National' and she is writing the first account of the ‘documentary imagination in radio’. Formerly a producer with the ABC, Madsen has contributed distinguished productions for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, and her work has been broadcast in Europe and the USA. Her critical writing is in key collections: *Companion to the Australian Media* (2014), *Radio’s New Wave* (Routledge, 2013), *Voice* (MIT Press, 2010) and *Radio* (Routledge, 2009).