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**Service from the Bottom of the World:  
The Voice of Australia, 1931-39**

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***Abstract***

In July 1931, a year-and-a-half before the BBC opened its Empire service, Amalgamated Wireless (Australia) launched an Experimental World-Wide Broadcasting Service, which continued until the outbreak of war. The enterprise aspired to distinctive forms of internationalisation and a broadcasting empire unlike the BBC's. The article examines this alternate model of overseas broadcasting and its interaction with the BBC's. It reveals a largely forgotten feature of early broadcasting in Australia and New Zealand, a global ambition, and confirms a familiar feature, the commercialism that owed more to American than British broadcasting. It is a case study of Dominion nationalism—assertive, and fired by frustration over policy determined at the imperial centre, but seeking to renegotiate the terms of the imperial relationship, not dissolve it. The young institutions of broadcasting, like the nation states that crafted them, explored different kinds of relationships, complementing, co-operating and competing with each other. Contemporary media globalisation helps us to re-imagine The Voice of Australia as it was, an ambitious attempt at a different kind of media service, rather than a largely forgotten 'wrong turn' on the way to state-controlled short-wave international broadcasting.

## **Service from the Bottom of the World: The Voice of Australia, 1931-39**

History tells us ‘empire broadcasting’ was something the BBC did from Daventry. The head of Australia’s dominant early wireless company thought it could be something else, undertaken by someone else, from someplace else. It could be global and commercial and he could do it himself from Sydney. For most of the 1930s he did, although the service was never able to earn commercial revenue directly. Transmitted on short-wave, The Voice of Australia reached audiences around the world, not just the British Empire. It closed when war broke out and the Australian Government decided to join other nation states in the international short-wave broadcasting business it had left largely to the private sector.

This article examines this alternate model of overseas broadcasting and its interaction with the BBC’s. The service from the bottom of the world ultimately failed, but it reveals a largely forgotten feature of early broadcasting in Australia and New Zealand, a global ambition. It also confirms a familiar feature, the commercialism that owes more to American than British broadcasting at the time. It is a case study of Dominion nationalism—assertive, and fired by frustration over policy determined in London, but seeking to renegotiate the terms of the imperial relationship, not dissolve it. The young institutions of broadcasting, like the nation states that crafted them, explored different kinds of relationships, complementing, co-operating and competing with each other. Complex and shifting relationships, especially between national public broadcasters like the BCC and the ABC and their extensive overseas audiences, are an important feature of today’s global media. This contemporary context helps us to re-inscribe the foundations of broadcasting, re-imagining The Voice of Australia as it was, an ambitious attempt at a different kind of media service, rather than a largely forgotten ‘wrong turn’ on the way to state-controlled short-wave international broadcasting.

On 5 September 1927, Amalgamated Wireless (Australasia), AWA, transmitted what it called an ‘Empire Broadcast’ on short-wave from Sydney. The programming was organised by a local radio station, 2FC, and one of the major daily newspapers, the *Sydney Morning Herald*.<sup>1</sup> AWA, which provided 2FC’s technical facilities, was managed as a commercial concern, although a bare majority of its shares had been held by the Commonwealth Government since 1922. Formed in 1913 by merging the Australian and New Zealand assets and activities of the British Marconi and German Telefunken companies, AWA was recapitalized to support investment in a new Australia-Britain wireless telegraph service. Half of the five-fold increase in approved capital to £A1 million (£981,000 sterling) was provided by the Australian Government. Representatives of the private and public shareholders each took three seats on the board and nominated a supposedly-independent seventh. The partnership was intended to balance commercial skills in running a sophisticated high-technology business with ultimate public control of a critical national enterprise. In practice, the choice of the seventh director meant the company was effectively controlled by Ernest Fisk, its managing director from 1917 to 1944. Born in England in 1886, Fisk trained with the Marconi Company, worked as a

wireless operator on international liners and came to Australia in 1911. Initially technical and general manager of AWA, he was soon its most powerful force, and became chairman as well as managing director in 1932. He left the company to take up the position as managing director of Electric and Musical Industries, EMI, in London from 1945-51.<sup>2</sup>

AWA's recapitalization occurred just as broadcasting was beginning to boom in the United States.<sup>3</sup> The same year, the British Broadcasting Company was formed as a consortium of wireless receiver manufacturers in London. Marconi's short-wave 'beam' technology sharply reduced the cost of the transmission facilities required for the international wireless telegraph service.<sup>4</sup> This allowed the company to contemplate expansion into the emerging field of broadcasting without raising further capital. Manufacturing operations grew and licences for local radio stations were sought. Further expansion into overseas broadcasting might contribute to AWA's profits in three ways. As an electronics manufacturer, the company could sell shortwave receivers. These would not be used to listen to AWA's own station, except in remote areas of Australia, but to those like the two Philips set up in the Netherlands in March 1927 for transmissions to the Dutch East Indies.<sup>5</sup> Second, the service might eventually attract advertising, although the experimental licence from Government prevented this. Third, the publicity would help to promote the company's other products and services, like long-wave receivers for domestic broadcasting stations and international wireless telegrams.

The first Empire Broadcast from Sydney spoke, rather than listened, to London. It included the Australian Prime Minister, the Governor of the state of New South Wales and a Sydney clock striking 3am. It could be received directly by experimenters around the world with short-wave receivers, but was also retransmitted on the BBC's medium-wave London station, 2LO, and by General Electric in the United States. *The Times* in London called it 'a great success'.<sup>6</sup> Fisk had already built his reputation and company around the conquest of vast distance and appeals to imperial sentiment. He particularly prized a reported world record distance for a merchant ship transmission during his days as a Marconi operator and the first successful direct wireless transmission of a message from Britain to Australia at the end of the First World War.<sup>7</sup> In April 1927, a direct commercial wireless telegraph service opened on this route. Fisk and former Australian Prime Minister Billy Hughes had fought hard for wireless communication between London and the most distant Dominions to be direct, rather than through a chain of intermediate stations which would be vulnerable in wartime. The following year, a similar service was launched with Canada.<sup>8</sup>

Wireless broadcasting too could be international. Though technically inevitable in Europe, this was a big challenge in isolated Australia and New Zealand. Fisk made much of reports from listeners in New Zealand and the United States who wrote to say they had listened-in to the long-wave 2FC before it was forced to move to a medium-wave frequency. He argued unsuccessfully for Australia to keep using the long-wave-lengths that helped this distant reception of local stations, but he lost out to competitors who wanted Australia's broadcasters occupying the same range of frequencies as America's, so cheap receivers could be imported. He constantly spoke of Australia as 'the Wireless

Centre of the South Pacific'. AWA took over all wireless communications in Fiji on behalf of the British Government in 1928, and had a radio station in Port Moresby in Papua New Guinea for a few years before the Second World War. The great goal, however, was a service that could be received over in 'the heart of the Empire'.

### ***A Wireless Age: AWA's converged communications business***

Year	International telecommunications	Broadcasting
1918	Direct wireless telegraphy Britain (Carnarvon)-Australia (Sydney) demonstrated	
1919		First Australian demonstration, Sydney
1921		Regular experimental concert service begins, Melbourne
1922	Government approves commercial direct wireless telegraph service, Britain-Australia. AWA recapitalised as public/private company	
1923		First licences granted, first services commence. AWA supplies technical facilities to some
1924	Wireless telephony Britain (Poldhu)-Australia (Sydney) demonstrated	Revised licensing regulations. A-class (getting a share of the listener licence fee) and B-class stations
1927	Commercial direct wireless telegraph service Britain (Post Office)-Australia (AWA) opens	First AWA Empire broadcasts
1928	Commercial direct wireless telegraph service Canada (Canadian Marconi)-Australia (AWA) opens	Government decides to tender for a private contractor to supply programming to A-class stations as licences expire in 1929 and 1930
1929		Successful tenderer, the Sydney-based Australian Broadcasting Company, begins to takeover A-class stations
1930	Commercial wireless telephone service Britain (Post Office)-Australia (AWA) opens	
1931		AWA launches 'The Voice of Australia' international short-wave service
1932		Australian Broadcasting Commission established. Takes over national broadcasting service from Australian Broadcasting Company. Technical facilities supplied by Post Office

So Fisk's international broadcasting plans were formed as part of a wider vision about wireless and improved communication between Australia and the rest of the world. AWA, like the Radio Corporation of America (RCA) with which it was closely aligned, was both a telecommunications and a broadcasting enterprise, an example of industrial convergence well before the term became a cliché of the communications business in the late twentieth century. The plans also developed at the same time as those for domestic broadcasting, where early organizational structures, business models and government policies were so unstable. Competition to be first to air with domestic long-wave

broadcasting spilled over into international short-wave demonstrations. The engineer who got a local Sydney station to air before 2FC also organised a 1927 broadcast that enabled Australian listeners to hear Big Ben live, through 2LO London, PCJJ Holland and the first local Sydney station.<sup>9</sup> AWA, with its mix of public and private ownership, aspired to the role of national broadcaster before a wholly state-owned one, the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC), was created in 1932. It argued that the public private partnership running international wireless telecommunications services so successfully was ideally suited to managing the combination of entertainment and influence that the radio broadcasting business had become.<sup>10</sup>

None of the three factors motivating AWA to experiment with international short-wave broadcasting mattered to the British Broadcasting Corporation. Established by Royal Charter less than a year before AWA's first Empire broadcast, it inherited a domestic broadcasting monopoly from the consortium of receiver manufacturers formed in 1922 as the British Broadcasting Company. Unlike AWA, the public BBC did not manufacture receivers and could not accept advertising on the stations it ran. Its primary revenue source was the licence fee charged to listeners in Britain. The Corporation was able to supplement these funds with substantial sums from the spectacularly successful commercial publishing venture, *Radio Times*, launched in September 1923, but its readers, too, were in Britain.<sup>11</sup> The BBC needed other reasons to pursue audiences overseas. It found one in imperial unity, although it was not initially clear that short-wave broadcasting would be a good tool for this purpose.

The technology for early international short-wave broadcasting was not sophisticated. AWA's second Empire broadcast in 1927 six weeks after the first fell well short of 'high-class'. The atmospherics that 'at first almost prevented anything from being heard clearly', improved sufficiently to allow the announcer to be heard declaring 'The time in Melbourne is now nine minutes past four on Monday morning, October 17'. A duet and a loud 'Coo-ee' followed. There was more distortion as actor Peter Gawthorne sang 'Boot and Saddle' and 'long periods during which nothing could be heard at all'.<sup>12</sup> This was exactly what the engineers at the BBC had warned. If the interests of imperial unity were to be served by so-called Empire broadcasting, its Chief Engineer P.P. Eckersley argued 'it will not be through sporadic and largely unintelligible reception'.<sup>13</sup> The Marconi Company was also working on the technology but publicly, it did not yet share the enthusiasm of its Australian affiliate, AWA.<sup>14</sup> It agreed the BBC should not yield to 'the easy position of taking premature and ill-considered action'.<sup>15</sup> Asa Briggs says John Reith took up the subject of Empire Broadcasting with 'vision and enterprise' long before the BBC eventually launched a regular service in December 1932,<sup>16</sup> but the public expressions through the letters pages of *The Times* in 1927 were cautious. The young corporation was not sure of the real demand from audiences in the colonies and dominions. It was also worried about creating expectations it could not fulfill, spending British listeners' licence fees on a service intended for distant audiences, inviting opposition from newspapers and stimulating increased demands from copyright owners. It was not interested in a mere 'stunt'.<sup>17</sup>

Others, however, were more immediately enthusiastic. Pioneer experimenter Gerald Marcuse was authorised by the British Post Office to transmit a program for reception in Australia and New Zealand. His first transmission on 1 September 1927, a few days before AWA's first Empire broadcast, was followed by a program of British-based Australian artists, transmitted a week after the AWA broadcast.<sup>18</sup> *The Times* reported Marcuse's second transmission as 'the first full Empire broadcast from Great Britain'. Local relays were arranged by the *Sydney Morning Herald's* morning rival, *The Sun*, and Melbourne's afternoon *Herald*.<sup>19</sup> When the BBC began trial transmissions from a station at the Marconi works in Chelmsford in November 1927, its first broadcast, of the Armistice Day service from Canterbury Cathedral, was enthusiastically received and rebroadcast in Australia and by 3YA in Christchurch, New Zealand.<sup>20</sup> In the United States, a number of experimental short-wave stations were set up.<sup>21</sup> A third broadcast from AWA two weeks after the second was relayed from WGY Schenectady and associated American stations, as well as in Britain and Australia.<sup>22</sup> When New Zealander Tom Heeney challenged Gene Tunney for the world heavyweight boxing title in 1928, a partly successful attempt was made to rebroadcast commentary from General Electric's 2XAD short-wave station.<sup>23</sup>

Under pressure from wireless experimenters and the 1927 Imperial Conference, the BBC started regular daily transmissions from Chelmsford in December 1927 to explore the 'possibilities and difficulties of Empire and world broadcasting' in conjunction with RCA's NBC network and Dominion broadcasters.<sup>24</sup> John Reith's enthusiasm for the imperial idea, however, was insufficient to convince Treasury or the Colonial Office to spend any money on it, so the BBC's continuing regular transmissions were funded from the BBC's licence fee revenue.<sup>25</sup> Overseas broadcasters maintained their activities too. In 1930, two-way conversations were set up between American explorer Richard Byrd and people in the United States, after Byrd returned to Dunedin from Antarctica. A landline was used from Dunedin to Wellington, broadcast transmission from the Wellington radio station to Sydney, short-wave broadcast from AWA's 2ME to Schenectady, and 2XAF Schenectady's short-wave station back around the world. The conversations were rebroadcast in the United States, Canada, England and Germany as well as New Zealand and Australia.<sup>26</sup> For the final cricket test match at The Oval on Don Bradman's first tour to England in 1930, AWA retransmitted on short-wave the ball-by-ball reports broadcast on local Australian medium-wave stations. These were constructed from international telegrams. This made the continuous updates, offered through the night in Australia, available to British short-wave enthusiasts, who were less well-served by the BBC's more sparse day-time cricket coverage.<sup>27</sup> AWA's shareholders were told the company's world-wide service earned no revenue but was 'of great value in making Australia well and favourably known to the outside world'.<sup>28</sup>

The Imperial Conference in 1930 endorsed the idea of an Empire broadcasting service, believing:

such a service, organised and conducted along sound lines, would be greatly appreciated by many persons in the Dominions, in India and in the Colonies and

would strengthen the ties between various parts of the British Commonwealth. It should also tend to stimulate trade and commerce within the Commonwealth.<sup>29</sup>

It welcomed the BBC's experimental work to date and proposals for a permanent service, but recognised the technical difficulties. The views of broadcasters and the authorities throughout the Empire should be sought about the nature of any service and their preparedness to contribute to its cost. Importantly for AWA, the Conference acknowledged that all Empire broadcasting need not come from London. It recognised

the desirability of encouraging broadcasting organisations in the various parts of the Commonwealth to arrange for the reciprocal broadcasting of programmes and events of special interest, in any cases where suitable means of long distance transmission may be available.<sup>30</sup>

On 5 July 1931, about four years after its first Empire Broadcast, several months before the BBC decided to go ahead on its own and establish a high power station for an Empire service at Daventry, AWA launched an Experimental World-Wide Broadcasting Service, 'The Voice of Australia'. 'Experimental' was included because the Post Office continued to refuse authorisation of a permanent service.<sup>31</sup>

Programming policy emphasised entertainment, information and Australia. Fisk said it was 'laid down as fundamental that only good news and information of Australia should be broadcast and anything detrimental should be banned'.<sup>32</sup> For the 1932/33 'Bodyline' cricket tests in Australia, a second short-wave station 3ME Melbourne transmitted four daily broadcasts totaling two hours, including the last 45 minutes of each day's play before stumps, at breakfast-time in London.<sup>33</sup> Publicity material from 1934 describes the program as 'entertainment interspersed with interesting and informative lectures and talks on Australian matters', opening and closing with 'the laughter of the Australian Kookaburra or Laughing Jackass'. It claimed to be the first international broadcaster to transmit the same program to different sections of the world at times most suitable for reception and relay in particular countries.<sup>34</sup> 'Favourable and appreciative reports' were received from around world—one listener was 'in the heart of the jungle of Borneo', another in United States used The Voice of Australia to demonstrate short-wave sets, and another in Chicago made gramophone records of the transmissions and sent them to AWA. Australia's national travel association provided 'popular talks on Australian topics' such as the Barrier Reef and hunting in the north-west.<sup>35</sup> 3ME broadcast a weekly program from November 1927 to June 1929, twice-weekly from November 1930 and daily except Sunday from November 1935. Another short-wave station was opened in Suva, Fiji in November 1935 and 6ME Perth began daily broadcasts in March 1937. Feature programming on the stations included a live broadcast of the opening of the Sydney Harbour Bridge in 1932, a talk by the violinist Zlatko Balokovic on his impressions of Australia, a lyre bird in Sherbrooke Forest, the President of the Surf Life Saving Association of Australia and programs specially targeted at Canada and New Zealand. Several programs were retransmitted on the NBC network in the United States.<sup>36</sup>



A year-and-a-half after AWA launched *The Voice of Australia*, the centre of the Empire started to talk back. In December 1932, with Jardine's English cricket team one-up in the *Bodyline* series in Australia, the BBC formally commenced an Empire Service of its own. Its experimental broadcasts since late 1927 had been at least as frequent as AWA's.<sup>37</sup> Once the formal service launched, it was on air for many more hours than *The Voice of Australia*. AWA's service, however was well-known to global short-wave listeners, whose letters were the main kind of feedback to broadcasters. In the two-and-a-half years after the BBC service started, the Australian company received 15,000 from overseas listeners, more than a third of the 41,000 the BBC received.<sup>38</sup>

The relationship between the BBC's service and Australian broadcasters became highly contested. The BBC had to decide what kind of role it would play in the international media market. Would it reach listeners directly via short-wave, or by supplying programs for rebroadcast over local stations? If it supplied programs to local rebroadcasters, who should they be? Anyone who asked? The pioneering short-wave broadcaster, AWA? The BBC's 'opposite number', the ABC, once established as a publicly-funded national broadcaster? Or the commercial stations that carried advertising, which had no counterpart in Britain? And if it allowed local rebroadcast, should it require payment? These decisions had to be made while the institutions of broadcasting were themselves changing rapidly.

Australia's national broadcaster—from 1929 until the establishment of the Commission in mid-1932, the Australian Broadcasting Company—and the Postmaster-General's (PMG's) Department were initially unenthusiastic about retransmitting programs from the BBC Empire Service. The quality of music reception would not be good enough to compete with local stations and news was already supplied direct by telegraph from the high power station at Rugby. Eye-witness descriptions of events and ceremonies, where the atmosphere mattered more than the technical quality, would be appreciated by Australian listeners, but the short-wave telephone channel opened in 1930 would be a better way to distribute this kind of programming.<sup>39</sup> This reluctance, however, didn't mean the Australian Broadcasting Company and the PMG's Department were happy for local B-class (later known as commercial) stations to retransmit the BBC's programs.

AWA started building a network of B-class stations in 1930/31, beginning with the country towns of Bendigo in Victoria and Townsville in Queensland. 2AY Albury in country NSW was acquired in 1931/32.<sup>40</sup> Stuart Doyle at the Australian Broadcasting Company complained to the head of the PMG's Department, H.P. Brown, when he learned from the BBC that AWA had arranged for its tiny group of stations to carry BBC programs.<sup>41</sup> This was several months after Brown had been attacked in the press for decreeing that the Sydney B-class station 2UW could not rebroadcast programs from the BBC's service. *Smith's Weekly* said local broadcasters regularly used international relays and praised AWA for 'always excelling at picking up overseas stations'. It condemned Brown, a former head of technical planning at the British Post Office brought to Australia in 1922 to reform the local counterpart, who wanted a BBC-style public broadcaster in Australia. For *Smith's Weekly*, it all reeked of the state trying to take control of an activity pioneered by private sector. '2UW cannot be too enterprising broadcasting British

programs,' it declared. 'PoohBah [Brown] wants these programs for himself.' The paper dismissed Brown's justification, that a provision in the international radio rules required permission before a station could rebroadcast another's signal. This was 'an old provision intended to prevent a French station pirating a German one ... [It was] never intended to apply to a British Dominion station relaying the central station of the Empire which is doing everything possible to encourage inter-Empire broadcasting'.<sup>42</sup>

Aware that Australia was on its way to creating a BBC-like national public broadcaster, the British broadcaster played this distant politics carefully. It had already developed terms governing the retransmission of its service by American stations. It had decided to grant exclusive rights to retransmit particular programs in a territory to the first broadcaster that applied within a month of the proposed broadcast. But, not wanting to offend its 'opposite number' in Australia, it changed its position to offer non-exclusive access to competing Australian broadcasters, while gently reminding Brown of the 'greater interest and greater enterprise shown by AWA'.<sup>43</sup> For the first series of Empire Recordings produced by the BBC, the ABC was awarded first run rights for six months. AWA paid £650 for the right to distribute the recordings to Australian commercial stations for twelve months after that, and was angry when, in 1934, the BBC advised it would grant exclusive Australian rights to the ABC in future.<sup>44</sup>

Although The Voice of Australia expanded through the 1930s, one of the highlights of AWA's international broadcast activities came on Empire Day 1933, when an ambitious 'Southern Seas Broadcast' was staged with the ABC and the PMG's Department in co-operation with overseas broadcasters and post offices. Speeches given at separate dinners in most Australian state capital cities, and in England, Canada and New Zealand, were relayed to each other, along with telegraph messages received from Pacific stations. Also broadcast was a concert from the Great Hall at Sydney University. This included the performance of 'The Call of the Southern Seas', a cantata specially composed for the occasion by Alfred Hill, an Australian composer brought up in New Zealand. It was, said the *Sydney Morning Herald*, a 'melodious work, lofty in feeling'. The proceedings were broadcast on local and short-wave stations and received clearly in England and Canada. A locally-constructed version of the flagship programs the BBC produced for Empire Day, Armistice Day and Christmas Day,<sup>45</sup> this Southern Seas Broadcast, according to publicity material, saw 'Great and Greater Britain ... webbed together by wireless...selected squares of the great chessboard of the British Empire, linked together by the lightning flashes...above and through all throbbing the living stream of fealty to King and Flag'.<sup>46</sup>

There was steady pressure for programming from the Dominions to be inserted into the BBC's overseas service, along the lines of the recommendation of the 1930 Imperial Conference. It is likely that the steps to include regular Australian programs in the overseas and home services, and AWA's demonstrated capacity to deliver them, stimulated the ABC's own tentative move into overseas broadcasting before the war. The Dominions took turns to supply programs for the BBC's Empire Day broadcasts, beginning with the ABC in 1934. The broadcast commenced with the chimes of the Sydney General Post Office, followed by a favourite song from the Great War, 'Australia

Will Be There'.<sup>47</sup> When the BBC started exploring the possibility of regular programs from Australia in 1935, Empire Service director J.B. Clark recalled that Fisk at AWA had 'once told [us] they would be only too pleased to put on special live programs at their cost'.<sup>48</sup> This, however, would 'involve closer co-operation with B stations than we have thought desirable in the past'.<sup>49</sup> Clark wrote to the ABC to see if it would be interested in transmitting programs on short-wave for rebroadcast in the afternoon in Britain, hinting that AWA's international service already provided a suitable option. Months later in mid-1936, the ABC's new general manager Charles Moses claimed it could not trace the letter but advised the ABC was planning to distribute 'special programs' by wireless telephone. The Commission had started using the Post Office's short-wave station at Lyndhurst in Victoria to broadcast to remote listeners in central and northern Australia the previous year. It now wanted the station's power increased, but it was apparently causing the Post Office difficulties.<sup>50</sup> Moses' concern about the BBC's relationship with the B-class stations was relayed to the British broadcaster through the ABC's London representative, who was assured the Corporation 'would deal with no other body than the Commission'. It was agreed, however, that it was 'impossible for [the BBC] to refuse to see B class station people when they came over here', or to provide technical facilities if requested for a broadcast talk.<sup>51</sup>

When war broke out, AWA's experimental short-wave licences were withdrawn and The Voice of Australia closed down. ABC programs transmitted from Lyndhurst to remote inland areas on short-wave had occasionally reached overseas audiences as well,<sup>52</sup> but the official history of Australian international short-wave broadcasting generally takes as its starting-point Prime Minister Menzies' opening of 'Australia Calling' on 20 December 1939. This service was jointly managed by the ABC and the Department of Information.<sup>53</sup> The Post Office's Lyndhurst transmitters and AWA's at Pennant Hills in Sydney were turned to new objects—presenting Australia's version of the Allied cause, carrying news to Australian servicemen and women, and later, maintaining contact with countries invaded by the Japanese.<sup>54</sup> Twelve years after AWA had launched the Laughing Jackass and The Voice of Australia across the world, Menzies announced: 'The time has come to speak for ourselves'.<sup>55</sup>

Fisk failed in a pitch for AWA to run these expanded world range services demanded by Government. In early October 1939, he prepared a paper for the minister for external affairs and information, Sir Henry Gullett, detailing AWA's experience to date.<sup>56</sup> It argued Australia had fallen behind Britain and the world since the company's pioneering broadcasts in 1927, and was in danger of losing its share of the limited frequencies available world-wide. World range broadcasting was beyond its infancy and would attain a maturity of 'gigantic proportions'. But it was

a new field of enterprise, which has no established codes or formulae. Knowledge and ability can only be gained from trial and experience. Australia, therefore, can become as effective as other countries provided it starts without delay and does not discard the valuable experience already gained through the AWA world-wide services.

Fisk recommended transmissions from AWA's Sydney station 2ME restart immediately, along with a second service sharing the transmitter used for AWA's North American wireless telephone service, opened in 1938. This is what occurred, but under the new management of the ABC and the Department of Information. He said increased transmitter power and additional directional aerials should be planned to bring the services up to the standard of those operated by European countries and the United States. AWA and STC, a subsidiary of the American ITT, were commissioned to build powerful new transmitters for 'Australia Calling' at Shepparton in country Victoria later in the war,<sup>57</sup> satisfying the desire of the British and Australian governments for a powerful, world-wide station able to continue delivering the British voice to the world if the BBC's Daventry site was bombed. Pearl Harbour made this project even more urgent.<sup>58</sup> As to the content of the broadcasts, Fisk's paper for Gullett argued the best procedure would be 'to employ experienced entrepreneurs of this world and let the future modify that experience by results'. Music would be the 'necessary foundation...because it is the highest development in the realm of sound'. There should also be news—provided by government—speeches, talks, comedy, drama, descriptions of interesting events and the Call of the Kookaburra. 'The secret of success, assuming good technical equipment and functioning, lies in attracting and holding the attention and interest of listeners.' Fisk envisaged the service being provided by AWA under contract to the government. As with the earlier plan for AWA rather than a statutory commission to provide the domestic national broadcasting service, this aspect of the proposal was not accepted. Instead of the 'experienced entrepreneurs of this world', Menzies appointed as Controller of Broadcasting in the Department of Information a senior lecturer in political philosophy from the University of Melbourne.<sup>59</sup>

Never regarded by the Post Office as anything more than an experiment, the war put an end to Fisk's imperial and international broadcast voice. Some Australians did, however, listen-in to the world on World Range Fisk Radiolas, a line of broadcast receiver manufactured by AWA. A newsletter, *Radiola Rambles*, provided a list of short-wave stations expected to provide the best reception in the coming weeks, and details of programs likely to be of interest and their reception times in Australia.<sup>60</sup> Fisk took to penning a personally-signed message on the first page, promising in February 1940 that, although the full measure of short-wave broadcasting might not be known for a generation,

its ultimate achievement cannot fall far short of the unification of world thought and ideals when the nations, perhaps understanding a common tongue and with a more sympathetic consideration for the advancement of civilisation, will no longer take recourse to war for the settlement of differences. If there is any force at man's command which can make a large contribution towards this millennium then I feel the future development and application of world range broadcasting is that force.<sup>61</sup>

The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Broadcasting, established as part of an overhaul of broadcasting regulation in 1942, investigated the post-war roles of the private and public sectors in international short-wave broadcasting in its first report. Fisk

expressed interest in leasing two or three of AWA's own channels to other commercial operators. The Committee, however, was sceptical about the practical prospects for commercial international services. It thought the only way to get Australian programs heard in any substantial way in competitive broadcasting markets like the United States would be if they 'thrust their way into American programs'. It did not rule out the possibility of commercial short-wave services at some future time, but agreed with the ABC that 'the primary function of the service should be to project Australia's characteristics, achievements, aspirations and points of view into the consciousness of other peoples'. The ABC should be given a reasonable opportunity to conduct overseas broadcasts 'as an exclusively national undertaking' with technical facilities adequate to the job of making 'the voice of Australia effectively heard throughout the world'.<sup>62</sup> The Government agreed, and 'Radio Australia', the name chosen to mark the transition from war to peace, stayed a public enterprise. It was more than fifty years before broadcasting law was changed to allow licences to be granted to private organisations for services transmitted from Australia 'targeted to a significant extent to audiences outside Australia'. This followed government funding cuts that forced a big reduction in Radio Australia's activities.<sup>63</sup> The main short-wave transmitter site in northern Australia was reported to have been leased to the evangelistic broadcaster Christian Vision.<sup>64</sup>

Across the Tasman, New Zealand also decided to establish an international short-wave broadcaster after the war, and to give the job to its publicly-funded national broadcaster. The Government wanted to let the world know where New Zealand stood ideologically, to provide a mechanism for contact with New Zealanders living or serving overseas, and to strengthen the already close ties with many Pacific Islands. This would ensure the Pacific region was not simply handed over to the BBC, the Voice of America and especially Australia's short-wave services. When trials commenced in 1947, most of the listeners who responded were in Australia, where the signal was received as clearly as local stations. Radio New Zealand's new External Services Division commenced services to the Pacific Islands, Antarctica and Australia in 1948.<sup>65</sup>

For Fisk and AWA, the BBC's model of short-wave international broadcasting in the 1930s seemed an Australian opportunity wasted. It was more public than private and the traffic was primarily from the centre, rather than reciprocal. Whether there was ever really a global audience for the kind of service Fisk wanted to run is impossible to determine. The number of letters received from overseas listeners suggests plenty of enthusiasm even by comparison with the much more ambitious BBC Empire service, although it may not have been concentrated in the 'heart of the Empire'. Siân Nicholas has described the increasingly regular Dominion relays on the BBC's Home Services in the 1930s (one a fortnight in 1937) as 'not an unambiguous success', and Dominion commentaries during the war as 'fatally hamstrung by the political sensitivities of the imperial relationship'. While the BBC worked increasingly hard during the war to insert Dominion voices and perspectives into its domestic services, the British public, she argues, 'simply preferred to hear about brash Americans, heroic Russians, or—especially— their plucky selves, rather than about their imperial relations'. Pro-empire propaganda, 'while at least maintaining the empire as that former vague and imprecise presence in the British outlook, could do nothing in practice to strengthen—or in fact to

slow the decline of—positive imperial feeling for the post-war world'.<sup>66</sup> This echoes Simon Potter's finding that British newspapers worked to incorporate Dominion content in the 1910s not because readers demanded it but because it attracted advertising from Dominion Governments and businesses.<sup>67</sup>

AWA's inability to carry advertising on its service prevented a serious test of the commercial potential of a service of this kind. It had imagined advertising revenue coming from new listeners whose nationality was irrelevant. Publicly-funded broadcasters like the BBC, by contrast, saw distant, non-national audiences whose attention would contribute nothing to their funds. Growing international tension in the 1930s created a market for the voices of nation states with an interest in the perceptions of citizens everywhere. This proved more lucrative than the commercial advertising AWA was never permitted to offer. But the publicity *The Voice of Australia* attracted, especially through events like the Southern Seas Broadcast, seems certain to have helped AWA sell short-wave receivers to Australians interested in listening-in to overseas stations and other wireless products (long-wave receivers) and services (international wireless telegraph and telephone, local broadcast stations in some centres).

The goal, the investment and the ceaseless promotion of radio broadcasting in its formative stages as international contrasts strikingly with later interpretations of the medium in Australia and New Zealand as primarily a local and national project. The service involved broadcasting to the world, not just the Empire, and to the Empire from somewhere other than its centre. This challenged broadcasting's institutional forms and market structures while they were still far from settled. Fisk's assertive vision, demonstrated most clearly in the South Seas Broadcast, was of a technically dexterous imperial network, co-ordinated from Sydney, enabling and demonstrating political and social unity, linking distant parts of the Empire in a conversation that the whole Empire could listen to. He wanted to reinvent the Empire, not end it. *The Voice of Australia* helped to articulate the kind of relationship the BBC would have with distant audiences. Its most important influence, however, may have been to motivate and prepare the ground for others, particularly the imperial family of public service broadcasters and the nation states that funded them, a family AWA could never join. In the contemporary era of satellite and cable television, video, DVD and especially the internet, the nature of the BBC's relationship with international audiences is again being rearticulated, as it asserts a role as a world media organisation in its own right, not just a partner in a network of like-minded national public broadcasters.

## **Acknowledgements**

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- <sup>1</sup> Broadcast from Sydney to the Empire. Speeches Heard in London, *The Times*, 5 Sept 1927, p. 10. The *Herald's* involvement and the speeches by the paper's proprietor James Fairfax and others were remembered in 'Successful Empire Broadcast. Countries linked', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 May 1933, p. 13.
- <sup>2</sup> Murray Goot, Fisk, Sir Ernest Thomas (1886 - 1965), *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol 8, (Melbourne, 1981), pp. 508-10.
- <sup>3</sup> A. Lescaboura, The gentle art of radio broadcasting, *Scientific American*, June 1922, pp. 376-7.
- <sup>4</sup> Daniel R. Headrick, *The Invisible Weapon: Telecommunications and International Politics 1851-1945* (Oxford and New York, 1991), pp. 202-6.
- <sup>5</sup> Gerard Mansell, *Let Truth Be Told: 50 Years of BBC External Broadcasting*, (London, 1982), p. 6; 'History of Radio Netherlands': <[http://www.radionetherlands.nl/aboutus/aboutnrlw\\_history](http://www.radionetherlands.nl/aboutus/aboutnrlw_history)> (19 June 2007).
- <sup>6</sup> Broadcast from Sydney to the Empire. Speeches Heard in London, *The Times*, 5 Sept 1927, p. 10; Successful Empire Broadcast. Countries linked, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 May 1933, p. 13; Mansell, p. 6.
- <sup>7</sup> E.T. Fisk, The Application and Development of Wireless in Australia, in Gerald Lightfoot (ed), *Pan-Pacific Science Congress* (Melbourne, 1923), pp. 619-631; The First Direct Wireless Messages from England to Australia, 1918 Souvenir, 'Cream' 740, The Marconi Archive, Bodleian Library, Oxford.
- <sup>8</sup> Edgar Harcourt, *Taming the Tyrant: the first 100 years of Australia's international telecommunications services* (Sydney, 1987), pp. 196-226.
- <sup>9</sup> Jan Brazier, 'Allsop, Raymond Cottam (Ray) (1898 - 1972)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol 13, (Melbourne, 1993), pp. 38-39.
- <sup>10</sup> 'Control and Management of National Broadcasting Service': MSS 6275 Box 25 f. 3, Mitchell Library [ML].
- <sup>11</sup> Asa Briggs, *The Birth of Broadcasting: The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom, vol 1* (London, 1961), pp. 295-308.
- <sup>12</sup> Second broadcast from Australia. Reception spoiled by atmospherics, *The Times*, 17 Oct 1927, p. 14.
- <sup>13</sup> P.P. Eckersley (Chief Engineer, BBC), Empire Broadcasting. A Technical Problem, *The Times*, 12 Aug 1927, p. 11.
- <sup>14</sup> Marconi companies retained the largest private shareholding in AWA after the 1922 recapitalisation.
- <sup>15</sup> F. Kellaway (Managing Director, Marconi's Wireless Telegraph Company), Policy of the BBC, Letter to the Editor, *The Times*, 17 Aug 1927, p. 11.
- <sup>16</sup> Asa Briggs, *The Golden Age of Wireless: The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom, vol 2* (London, 1965), p. 370.
- <sup>17</sup> Empire Broadcasting, *The Times*, 20 May 1927, p. 20; Briggs, pp. 371-2.
- <sup>18</sup> Empire Broadcasting. Australian Experiment, *The Times*, 1 Sept 1927, p. 8.
- <sup>19</sup> Empire Broadcast. Special Transmission to Australia, *The Times*, 12 Sept 1927, p. 14.
- <sup>20</sup> Briggs, p. 372; Patrick Day, *The Radio Years: A History of Broadcasting in New Zealand, vol 1* (Auckland, 1994), p. 130. The broadcast included a ten-minute talk by John Reith.
- <sup>21</sup> 38 by 1938: Erik Barnouw, *The Golden Web: A History of Broadcasting in the United States 1933-53* (New York, 1968), p. 115.
- <sup>22</sup> J. Mulholland, 'Notes on AWA prepared by Mr Mulholland', June 1946, 'Historical File No 1': MSS 2954/1910 Box 30, ML.
- <sup>23</sup> Day, p. 130.
- <sup>24</sup> Empire Broadcasting, *The Times*, 10 Dec 1927, p. 8.
- <sup>25</sup> Mansell, pp. 1-19.
- <sup>26</sup> Day, pp. 130-1.
- <sup>27</sup> World Broadcast of Test Match, *The Times*, 16 Aug 1930, p. 8; K.S. Inglis assisted by Jan Brazier, *This is the ABC: the Australian Broadcasting Commission 1932-83* (Melbourne, 1983), pp. 36-9; Sue Javes, The great survivor, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 Oct 2003, p. 6. The famous synthetic broadcasts, which used simulated sound effects, were undertaken by the ABC for the 1934 tour.
- <sup>28</sup> AWA Ordinary General Meeting 1929/30, 29 Oct 1930: AWA, Homebush West, Sydney.
- <sup>29</sup> *Summary of Proceedings, Imperial Conference 1930*, Cmd. 3717, p. 58.
- <sup>30</sup> *Summary of Proceedings, Imperial Conference 1930*, p. 58.
- <sup>31</sup> Fisk, *Report on World Range Broadcasting*, p. 3: MSS 6275 Box 25 f. 5. ML.

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- <sup>32</sup> Fisk, *Report on World Range Broadcasting*, p. 4.
- <sup>33</sup> Broadcast of Test Matches. Direct Transmissions from Australia, *The Times*, 6 Dec 1932, p. 11.
- <sup>34</sup> AWA, VK2ME 'The Voice of Australia' (Sydney, c. 1934): MSS 2954/1910 Box 47, ML. There were four zones: [1] Australia and the western portion of North and South America and England [2] southern and eastern Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific [3] Western Australia, China, Japan, the Philippines, the Straits Settlements, USA, most of India, South Africa and Rhodesia [4] Great Britain, Western Europe and Egypt. A 1929 memorandum at the BBC proposed four different programs transmitted at different times for the African colonies, South Africa, Australasia and Canada: Mansell, p. 14.
- <sup>35</sup> *AWA Directors Report to Shareholders, 1930/31*: AWA, Homebush West, Sydney.
- <sup>36</sup> 'AWA World Range Feature Broadcasts', pp. 24-8 in Fisk, 'Report on World Range Broadcasting'.
- <sup>37</sup> See Chapter 1 'Origins', in Mansell, pp. 1-19.
- <sup>38</sup> Malcolm Frost internal BBC memo, [AWA], 27 March 1936: E12/8, BBC Written Archives Centre, Reading [BBC WAC].
- <sup>39</sup> H.P. Brown, 'Empire Broadcasting Notes, 17 April 1931'; Brown interview with Stuart Doyle, 17 April 1931; Doyle to Reith, 23 April 1931: 'Wireless Broadcasting Programmes - Empire Broadcasts, 1930-32', Series MP341/1 Control 1933/6781: National Archives of Australia [NAA], Melbourne.
- <sup>40</sup> Postmaster-General's Department, *Annual Reports*, 1930/31 to 1931/32.
- <sup>41</sup> Doyle to Brown, 21 Sept 1931: Series MP 341/1 Control 1933/6781: NAA, Melbourne.
- <sup>42</sup> Government monopoly gets in the road of radio waves. Pooh-Bah Brown butts in again. 2UW cannot be too enterprising broadcasting British programs, *Smith's Weekly*, 23 May 1931, p. 3.
- <sup>43</sup> Atkinson to Doyle, 13 Aug 1931; Atkinson to Brown, 8 Oct 1931; 'Conditions Governing Relaying Relaying of the [BBC's] Programmes by Dominion and Colonial Broadcasters, Dec 1932': Series MP 341/1 Control 1933/6781: NAA, Melbourne. Other terms included: the relayer could not authorize a further third party rebroadcast; the relayer was responsible for local copyright fees; and the relayed matter could not be included in, or directly associated with any programme provided by an advertiser.
- <sup>44</sup> Transcriptions, [AWA], 1932-36, E17/3, BBC WAC.
- <sup>45</sup> John M. Mackenzie, "In Touch with the infinite": The BBC and the Empire, 1923-53, in Mackenzie (ed), *Imperialism and Popular Culture* (Manchester, 1986), pp. 165-91.
- <sup>46</sup> Great Broadcast. Empire Countries Linked. Successful Experiment, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 May 1933, p. 9 and Successful Empire Broadcast. Countries Linked. Speeches by Eminent Men, p. 13. Program, circuit layout and publicity material at MSS 2954/1910 Box 61, ML.
- <sup>47</sup> Empire Day Broadcast. Programme from Australia, *The Times*, 1 May 1934, p. 16. See also Sian Nicholas, "Brushing up your Empire": Dominion and colonial propaganda on the BBC's home services, 1939-45, *Journal of Commonwealth and Imperial History*, vol 31 no 2, pp. 207-30.
- <sup>48</sup> J.B. Clark (Director, Empire Service), BBC internal memo, 18 October 1935: 'Countries: Australia. ABC: Rebroadcasting 1935-47', E1/323, BBC WAC.
- <sup>49</sup> J.B. Clark (Director, Empire Service), BBC internal memo, 21 October 1935: E1/323 BBC WAC.
- <sup>50</sup> Moses to Clark, 30 June 1936: E1/323 BBC WAC.
- <sup>51</sup> Cecil Graves (Controller, Programmes), BBC internal memo, 28 July 1936: E1/323 BBC WAC.
- <sup>52</sup> Peter Lucas, *The Constant Voice: Radio Australia 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary 1939-64* (Sydney, 1964), p. 4.
- <sup>53</sup> Errol Hodge, *Radio Wars: Truth, Propaganda and the Struggle for Radio Australia* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 8; Kim Jackson, The Role and Funding of Radio Australia, Parliamentary Library e-Brief, 18 Sept 2000: <[http://www.aph.gov.au/library/intguide/sp/radio\\_australia.htm](http://www.aph.gov.au/library/intguide/sp/radio_australia.htm)> (6 March 2008); Inglis, pp. 79-80, 156. Taken over by the Department of Information in 1944, the service was renamed Radio Australia after the war and returned to the ABC in 1950.
- <sup>54</sup> Lucas, pp. 3-5.
- <sup>55</sup> Hodge, p. 8.
- <sup>56</sup> Fisk, 'Report on World Range Broadcasting'. The report was also sent to Billy Hughes: MS 1538 Series 31 f. 9, National Library of Australia; A. J. Hill, Gullett, Sir Henry Somer (1878 - 1940), *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol 9, (Melbourne, 1983), pp. 137-139.
- <sup>57</sup> James Murray, *Calling the World: The First 100 Years of Alcatel Australia 1895-1995* (Double Bay NSW, 1995), p. 65. The ABC's official history of Radio Australia says the first Shepparton transmitter, which began operating in 1942, was a 50-kilowatt unit from RCA: ABC Press and Public Information Department, *The Constant Voice: Radio Australia 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary 1939-69* (Canberra, 1969), p. 33. AWA held Australian rights to RCA's patents.



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<sup>58</sup> Rex Wales, Radio Australia's Fiftieth Anniversary, *Radio Waves* (April 1996), pp. 23-4; *The Constant Voice: Radio Australia 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary 1939-69*, p. 33.

<sup>59</sup> Inglis, p. 79.

<sup>60</sup> From 1925, the BBC published a supplement to the *Radio Times* providing information about 'foreign programmes that BBC listeners were encouraged to hear': Briggs, *Birth*, p. 307.

<sup>61</sup> *Radiola Rambles*, Feb 1940, p. 1.

<sup>62</sup> *First Report of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Broadcasting* (Canberra, 1943), pp. 22-3.

<sup>63</sup> *Broadcasting Services Act 1992*, Part 8B, inserted by the *Broadcasting Services Amendment Act 2000*; ABC, *Annual Report 1997/98* (Sydney, 1998), p. 19.

<sup>64</sup> Simon Mann, We Might Be Christians, But We're No Nut Cases, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 June 2000, p. 11.

<sup>65</sup> Andrew M. Clark, Radio New Zealand International: The Voice of New Zealand, Broadcasting to the Pacific, *Journal of Radio Studies*, vol 13 no 1 (2006), pp. 102-15.

<sup>66</sup> Siân Nicholas, "Brushing up your Empire": Dominion and colonial propaganda on the BBC's home services, 1939-45, *Journal of Commonwealth and Imperial History*, vol 31 no 2, pp. 207-30.

<sup>67</sup> Simon Potter, *News and the British World: the Emergence of an Imperial Press System 1876-1922* (Clarendon and New York, 2003).