Book Reviews

The Wired Nation Continent: The Communication Revolution and Federating Australia

K. L. Livingston

Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1997, xiv + 218 pp., AU$55.00, ISBN 0 19 553633 9

History does not play a significant part in the reflections of policy makers and, it would seem no part at all in the minds of those who are currently pressing us towards the information superhighway, the global village, telecommuting and an increasingly wired domestic, national and international world.

It is, hence, refreshing to turn to a small book, its scholarship deriving sustenance from many grant sources including Telstra's Fund for Social Policy Research in Telecommunications, that brings perspective to contemporary telecommunication debate in Australia from insights drawn from the late nineteenth century and the communication issues that engaged both bureaucrats and politicians in the Australian Colonies for two decades before federation in 1901 into the Commonwealth of Australia.

The primary focus of historian Kevin Livingston's book, is, as he puts it:

> the origin of the government's power over public communication services in Australia from the development of regular overseas mail services and the introduction of the new electrical communication technology of the telegraph, beginning in the 1850s, to the constant public and parliamentary debates about overseas cable routes in the latter half of the 19th century, which led to the centralizing of government control of telecommunication and broadcasting by the beginning of the twentieth century. (p. 4)

Lucidly presented, Livingston has set out to take up an important theme in Australia's telecommunication history, the influence of the key technological bureaucrats in the Australian Colonies—the superintendents of telegraphs, the role of the colonial press, and the gathering stream of intercolonial Postal and Telegraph (P&T) conferences held in the Australian capitals and New Zealand from 1867–1900 that examined issues of communication (postal, telegraph, tariffs, subsidies, cables, and intercolonial and international agreements and arrangements); focussed co-operation and differences, and proved a telling exercise in 'practical federation'.

There was one important precursor. The very rapid extension of telegraphy (introduced into Australia in 1854 by one of Morse's students, the young Canadian, Samuel McGowan), across the borders of the eastern colonies of South Australia, Victoria and New South Wales by 1858, and into Queensland in 1861, marked an early federative-style initiative. It also marked the pre-eminence gained in Australia of electrical communication over transportation. Intercolonial railway links lagged behind the telecommunications network by thirty years. Australian experience in this differed from that of Canada, federated a generation earlier in 1867, but a country where the tyranny of distance also prevailed. In both societies, the author notes, 'there was perennial

preoccupation and fascination with the potential of new forms of communication technology and new telecommunication routes' (p. 10). But federation in Canada was predominantly propelled for the purpose of pushing the railways out to her remote Pacific and Atlantic borders.

In Australia, it is Livingston's thesis, that bureaucratic, press and, increasingly, political interest in the development of telecommunications became a potent force in the evolving process of federation and culminated in the inclusion in the federal Constitution of a clause that gave the Commonwealth government of 1901 wide-ranging and monopoly powers over areas of the country's internal and external telecommunications, radio communications broadcasting. Livingston interprets this as a form of 'technological federalism' and 'technological nationalism' and it is the great merit of the book that it has opened up a new dimension to the analysis of federation history.

Divided into three parts, the book addresses 'Cooperation and rivalry' (colonial), Part 1, 'International Dimensions', Part 2, and 'Federating Communications', Part 3. In the last, Livingston has made a research assault on the detailed, pragmatic, and highly protracted negotiations that engaged each Colony's ministerial postmaster-general and their key technical bureaucrats, across some 25 P&T conferences which were widely reported in the press. Foremost among the civil service technologists was Charles (later Sir Charles) Todd, management supremo of the Overland Telegraph Line and, for more than 40 years, Government astronomer and Superintendent of Telegraphs (later named deputy Postmaster-General) of South Australia. The influence, with their special knowledge, of Todd, McGowan, and the British Cracknell brothers, Edward and William, respectively Superintendents of Telegraph in New South Wales and Queensland, provides an interesting theme of the book.

By the time the national Federation Conference was held in 1890 and the first official Australasian Federal Convention in 1891, communication issues had entered the wider political discussion of the draft constitution. Ideas for the governance of telecommunications in a federated Australia changed and flowed. But, by a process of evolution, the Federal Government was given power under section 51, Clause 5 of the new constitution to make laws for 'postal, telegraphic, telephonic and other like services'. By this last encompassing expression—'other like services'—the Commonwealth Government inaugurated in 1901, secured remarkable and enduring powers (far greater than those of the US or Canadian federal governments) over Australia's telecommunications services and industries and broadcasting in the 20th century.

While the Australian government's decision-making on telecommunications has shifted to an extent following the Telecommunications Act of 1989 and through increasing deregulation of the 1990s, the government maintains a pervasive control in the telecommunications arena, and the long arm of history continues to give a distinctive cast to Australia's telecommunications regime. At a time of rapid globalization, Livingston would like to see its constitutional power as the government's opportunity to protect the 'national and cultural interest' (p. 186). But this pious hope is not submitted to analysis.

What, however, does emerge from this study is the enlightening relevance of history to contemporary affairs. In common with our current experience, colonial Australians were deeply interested in new communication technologies. 'Cable fever' reigned for many years before the technology was available or proven, a fever fanned consistently by the colonial press. Reading their reports, which provide much material for the book, there is a strong sense of the truth of the maxim that 'burning issues of the day most frequently are replays of the past' (p. 11). My own *Clear Across Australia*[1] left me a firm advocate of this opinion and committed to the belief that knowledge of our national

telecommunication origins can bring important perspective in a changing environment to our national policy making and goals.

Through his scholarly research, Livingston has opened up a spectrum of neglected historical debate, discussion, and intercolonial policy bargaining that illuminates the foundations of the communication revolution in Australia and will be of interest to telecommunication bureaucrats, policy makers, and those involved in communication, constitutional law, history, comparative studies, politics and information technology. As we move towards celebrating the centenary of Australia's Federation, *The Wired Nation Continent* is a particularly timely contribution.

Reference

1. A. Moyal, *Clear Across Australia: A History of Telecommunications*, Thomas Nelson Australia, Melbourne, 1984.

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Communication Traditions in 20th-century Australia

Graeme Osborne & Glen Lewis

Melbourne Oxford University Press, 1995, x + 195 pp., AU$22.95, ISBN 0 19 553511 1.

Not Just Another Business: Journalists, Citizens and the Media

Julianne Schultz (Ed.)

Leichhardt, New South Wales, Pluto Press, 1994, 243 pp., AU$19.95, ISBN 1 86403 015 1.

An historical retrospective requires both a decision about the period to be covered and the scope of that which has to be covered. The title of the book by University of Canberra academics, Graeme Osborne and Glen Lewis, indicates the time, but the issue of scope is more problematic. Early on they remind us the communications history of Australia involves the transport system, but this theme is not pursued. At the more recent end there is little on the internet. The main interests are the evolution of the role and policies of newspapers, film, radio, (traditional) telecommunications, and television. The focus is on public communication used for national development, for community building, for cultural expression, and as a means of exercising power for the purposes of societal control.

Their story is told in terms of five chapters: a neo-colonial nation 1900–20; national development and media monopolies 1920–40; cultural anxieties and the search for community 1940–50; 'just slightly different sorts of Americans'? 1950–75; communication and contemporary Australia 1975–93. Thus the study, one of a series of 'Australian retrospectives', provides an account of part of Australia's cultural history since federation.

The authors summarize this larger goal, in the title of their introduction 'making the people articulate?', about who has the right to speak in public, and about what—to say what is proper, what is reasonable, or what is loyal or disloyal.