

SWITCHING OFF

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Jock Given, *Turning off the Television: Broadcasting's Uncertain Future*

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[255] This book makes an important contribution to modern communications policy history and thinking. It does this in a well researched and entertaining way. Primarily it is the story of how Australia has made its policy decisions to move from analogue to digital transmission of television. But it is more than that. Whilst at times the detail is painstaking in its completeness and accuracy this is what will make it a valuable reference book for many years to come.

It provides a crisp account of the rise and fall of the dotcom sector, the introduction and development of television and radio in Australia, the US and the UK, a fascinating story about the introduction of FM radio, an explanation of why broadcasting became something special, a blow by blow account of the digital TV and datacasting policy and legislative decisions of 1998 and 2000, the future of digital radio and plenty of useful views and insights for policy makers as to where the future might go and what the issues are. It is action packed. Issues range broadly from appropriate market structures to localism in radio and TV and adequate support for Australian cultural practices and expression.

The title of the book refers to one of the key underlying assumptions made in arriving at the current digital broadcasting policy settings; that there will be a time when all analogue TVs will be turned off and the analogue spectrum returned to government for re-sale.

Given's conclusion on this issue is that:

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... the introduction of digital broadcasting and the possible shut down of analogue broadcasting provide a fantasy moment for a range of analogue clear — fellers ... no-one is certain whether broadcasting's digital future is going to be a bonfire or a campfire, a revolution or an evolution ... but by the time anyone is certain, long before analogue broadcasting is turned off, there'll be another set of technologies itching to get turned on — faster or fatter or stranger than those that gripped fin de siecle [end of century] media policy.

[256] What I like most about this book are its entertaining cartoons, quotes and quips. It is this that puts the serious tale of the evolution of digital terrestrial television in Australia in a context that allows the reader to see the funny side and the sad side of what Given describes as 'a nightmare of deals, small and large, which future observers — not a decade off, but tomorrow, next month, next year — would look at and wonder, simply, "What were they thinking?"'.

Here are some classic 'Jockisms':

Bronzed ANZACS whose heroism was supposed to have been made uniquely Australian through their drinking, smoking, gambling ways, might have found it hard to believe that by 2001, the country would outlaw both tobacco advertising (where Paul Hogan got his start) and interactive gambling services. Of the Aussie trifecta, only drinking seemed to have survived unscathed, although even that, before driving, made you a 'Bloody Idiot'.

The people who run broadcasting may be powerful, but those who watch and listen to it will have at least as big a say in what happens to it.

And on the vast amounts paid for spectrum at auction:

Governments in the 1990s became addicted to revenues from the sale of radiofrequency spectrum. ... How much easier to sell off a bit of the ether than to raise taxes or cut spending.

Generally governments should not be concerned about the fate of individual companies who choose to 'over-bid' for assets — there is usually some bottom-feeder around to

acquire them at a more realistic price But the fate of an entire industry with a central role in society and the economy may deserve more attention.

And as to the future of broadcasting:

The choices to allocate spectrum and in some cases government money to fund the transition to digital TV and radio gave broadcasters a chance to stay special. But it was only a chance. The question was — and still is — what to do with it.

The pockets of its audience are the main places TV broadcasters are likely to find new money to fund broadcasting and related electronic media services.

What would be required to substantially reshape TV viewing or ‘using’ choices in Australia is a substantial new revenue stream, or significantly higher or affordable bandwidth, or a different and disruptive face in the free-to-air industry.

It would take brave operator to try its luck with a single new free-to-air franchise in a TV market rapidly consolidating around the Foxtel partners.

And on the future of the cross-media rules:

A first structural response might be for government to shape, and media proprietors to make a new election along the lines of the Princes of Print, Queens of the Screen, Rajahs of radio choice imposed by the cross-media laws. The choice would be to become ‘Kings of Cable and Satellite’ or ‘Titans of Terrestrial’.

And some gems from others such as Senator Bob Brown in relation to the Government’s last minute decision to restrict what the national broadcasters could use their multi channels for:

[257] Kerry Packer could not have written this amendment better himself ... I do not know what the Labor Party was given for lunch and I do not know what the government got for lunch either. But it certainly made a manifest difference to the direction this committee is going in after lunch.

Given brings unique knowledge and experience to this text. His years as Director of the Communications Law Centre and his knowledge and history about the policy of how Australian film and television programs are nurtured and produced (from his time at the Australian Film Commission) is brought to bear on his analysis of key issues.

For example, his crisp analysis of the Big Brother phenomenon demonstrates a deep understanding of the role that content plays in the digital revolution, how commercial television works and its dependence on advertising revenue.

Big Brother ... showed how some aspects of TV broadcasting were enduring while others were declining. New revenue streams are becoming important for TV program-makers and broadcasters, and new skills are being required to produce TV programs and their associated content and activities. However this has not condemned the social and cultural experiences and business models of free-to-air TV to overnight irrelevance.

Big Brother would provide more television than anyone had ever dreamt of although most of it would never make it to 'television'.

This is a valuable reference book on many layers. For example it provides the only account of the evolution of digital radio policy in this country. From an announcement by the Minister now five years ago that digital radio was just around the corner, we are still waiting for something to happen. There are very few publicly available documents explaining why this is so but now we have an account which tells this history.

The book concludes that:

As revolutions go, broadcasting's digital transformation may be a little slower and a little less socially and economically special than promised, but its today's revolution, the media tussle of this hour. We need to make everything we can of it, while carefully preparing the ground for the next one.

This book is essential reading for all communications and media policy students but also deserves to be read widely by those who make and implement communications and media policy decisions — be they politicians, bureaucrats, lawyers, broadcasters, film and TV program makers, other content producers, spectrum users, carriers, internet service providers or others. In fact anyone who wants to follow the curious path of policy decisions that now underpin Australia's transition to digital broadcasting will find some answers here.