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<th>Projecting Australia into Asia : the role of AusTV</th>
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Projecting Australia Into Asia:
The Role Of AusTV

By

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Projecting Australia into Asia: The Role of AusTV.

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Projecting Australia into Asia: The Role of AusTV.

We should be projecting to the world the truth about Australia: this is a robust democracy, a society rich and diverse and unique as the continent itself. A people able to imagine their future and the world. A creative people, able to make things the world wants to buy. Able to deliver the information and services which the world needs. Able to deliver products of their imagination and culture.

(Paul Keating inaugurating the ATVI service February, 1993. Quoted in Knight, 1994:5)

Australia's Prime Minister's strong endorsement of Australia's international television service raises more questions than it could possibly answer. Whose imagination is at work here? Whose culture is to be projected? Moreover, which Australia is to be projected? To whom is Australia talking in this process? Which Asian version of the imaginary Australia will be addressed? What future is there for Australia? There is a multiplicity of answers to each of these questions just as there is a multiplicity of imagined Australias that could be projected. Paul Keating mentions diversity but in reality projects a singular Australia that is at odds with the articulations of multicultural Australia. This singularity sees Australia as creative and also economically viable. Given this endorsement and the Australia it constructs it is not surprising that some Asian states view Australian
Television (hereafter AusTV) as a propaganda arm of the Australian government. In other words, AusTV carries the mantle of Radio Australia. The relationship between the state, the imaginary and Asia created under the mantle is much more complex than Paul Keating suggests and constitutes the focus of the paper.

The relationship requires contextualising. Australian political culture in the 1990s is dominated by three interrelated concerns: the question of indigenous land rights; the move towards a republican form of government; and Australia's changing relationship with Asia. Collectively the presence of these issues marks a profound re-orientation in Australia consciousness. However, it is the changing relationship with Asia that seems to have the most significant impact, impinging on all aspects of Australian contemporary culture, from business to sport, with the potential to radically change Australia. Australia's prior relationships with Asia have been ambiguous, oscillating between ignorance and indifference. This ambiguity has been projected in a number of ways, from military intervention to large scale aid, with the external manifestation primarily reflecting internal concerns. However, the recent developments governing Australia's relationships with Asia have been subverted by changing economic and political developments that require Australia to find new ways of projecting itself into Asia. The introduction of AusTV is part of these changes.

David Hill, Managing Director, Australian Broadcasting Corporation hails AusTV as an unqualified success. (Simper, 1994) Others are more sceptical (Knight, 1994: Cunningham and Ritchie, 1994) To
negotiate the gulf between the views of management and its critics concerning AusTV it is necessary to understand the service's roots in a culture of national broadcasting. Further, it is also necessary to position AusTV as a radical new form of the imaginary in the Australian context. It represents an attempt to construct a new "voice" for Australia in the Asian region. That it is a muted "voice" alerts us to the fact that no language has yet been found with which to speak to Asia. In short, AusTV is an articulation of a new agenda: "the push to Asia" (Lee, 1993).

AusTV's struggle to enunciate Australia in Asia is shaped by a number of factors. Firstly, it is generally starved of funds. Secondly, it is too closely associated with one aspect of the Australian political agenda. Thirdly, it is too ethnically narrow and fails to project cultural diversity. All these factors are related and when considered together suggest that AusTV represents a problematic of the Australian imaginary that is shaped as much by internal factors specific to the Australian condition as external ones.

The problems of AusTV will be explored from three perspectives (the genealogical, the economic and the imaginary) within a critical framework developed from the writings of Harold Innis on the "bias of communication" (Innis, 1991). I will argue that while AusTV represents a significant departure from previous Australian broadcasting ventures into Asia, it has one serious flaw. Until it can speak to Asia in an acceptable "voice" it will continue to expose Australia's failure to imagine its Asian connections.
Genealogy.

In this section some features of a genealogy will be sketched in although the exhaustive genealogy of Australian-Asian media relations has yet to be constructed. Two aspects will be considered in detail: the role of Australian print journalists/correspondents as interpreters of Asia and the place of Radio Australia in projecting a constructed image of Australia to Asia. Television is a new and as yet untested addition.

Until recently any academic interest in the Asian media in Australia was perceived as either a marginal exercise or eccentric. Moreover, the Australian media display attitudes that oscillate between indifference and intensity, depending on how Asian factors relate to domestic politics. As a profit driven entity the Australian media tends to operate according to pragmatic demands. The late 1980s and early 1990s saw profits evaporate and the Australian media cut their cloth accordingly. Representation in Asia has been one of the casualties of the desire to return to profitability on the part of the Australian media. Tiffen (1994) argues that there will be less Asian news in the Australian media rather than more in the late 1990s because of the economic imperatives that determine its shape. Nevertheless, it is clear that Australian journalists have had a long and fruitful involvement in reporting Asia in the Western media.

A lineage extends back at least to George Morrison who went to Beijing.
Shoesmith.

in 1987 as correspondent for The Times of London. He became an authority on China, played a gallant part in the defence of the legations during the Boxer rising, and in 1912 became political adviser to Yuan Shih-k'ai, first president of the Chinese republic.

(Pearl, 1967:i).

There is more than an element of 'orientalism' displaced as romanticism in Pearl's account of Morrison as authority, gallant and adviser. In effect he combined journalism with espionage and plunder disguised as collecting. Morrison acquired status in the west as an interpreter of the other. However, he fundamentally backed the wrong horse in Chinese politics and thus became marginalised without ever losing his status. Hence his significance. Morrison is a paradigm figure of the western journalist as expert interpreter of Asia to the west. The lineage includes other significant figures such as W H Donald who was to exert "a substantial influence on the policies of China for a full decade (Clubb, 1972: 151) as an adviser to the KMT. Like Morrison, Donald ultimately backed the wrong side, but his motivation differed. Donald was anti-imperialist and pro-nationalist. He accepted something that escaped Morrison: the fact that non-Europeans "would rather govern themselves badly, corruptly even, than be governed by an alien administration." (Pearl, 1967:ii)

Other Australian journalists have worked in Asia besides Morrison and Donald. These include Dennis Warner, Wilfred Burchett and the local correspondents of the ABC who moved into the region in the post-World War II era. They should be seen as both gatekeepers and agenda setters performing both functions as a matter of course as interpreters of Asia. They are gatekeepers in the sense that they apply filters to Asian events for western consumers. They are
agenda setters in the sense that they set in place the very elements that the west imagines as constituting Asia: the economic 'miracle', the lack of political democracy, the intransigence of certain leaders, the otherness of Cambodia and so on. Their appeal is to the informed and the concerned, and thus represents an elitist perspective on Asia that is quite distinct from the tourist view.

Burchett is a problematic figure in this lineage. On the one hand he cannot be considered in any way a 'voice' for the western media in his journalism. The Australian government demonised Burchett throughout the 1950s, 1960s into the 1970s as a traitor, confiscating his Australian passport (Burchett, 1980). On the other hand, Burchett was a European voice in the region, an advocate of modernity and political change.

The turning point in this genealogy is undoubtedly World War II when Australia decided to establish an external radio broadcasting service. The creation of Radio Australia in 1939 as an external propaganda branch of the Department of Information is closely allied to the developments within the ABC to create its own news service. Radio Australia officially became a section of the ABC in 1950 but from its inception it adhered to Reithian ideologies of programming and services (Semmler, 1981: 164-165). Thus Australian broadcasting to Asia is thoroughly enmeshed in domestic broadcasting politics especially in regard to the provision of public service programming. In addition to domestic broadcasting issues Radio Australia also had to negotiate its strong links to Foreign Affairs. As Semmler says

7 Projecting Asia.
the service is obviously (as all overseas broadcasting services are) primarily propaganda in content, the Foreign Affairs Department has an over-riding interest certainly in its news and current affairs programmes. The ABC has, over the years, vacillated between the acceptance of this view, and occasional stubborn shows of resistance against Foreign Affairs encroachment.

(Semmler, 1981: 165-166.)

This ambiguity, the struggle between the Reithian tropes of balance, objectivity and fairness and perceived national self-interest compromised Radio Australia at least into the 1970s. The recent release of documents relating to Australia's diplomacy in Asia in the early 1960s underscores the compromised nature of the service. Menzies and Casey were open in their view that Radio Australia's function was primarily propagandistic, necessary in the fight against international communism and in the fight to secure hearts and minds in the Asian region (Pemberton, 1994).

By the mid-1970s the position of Radio Australia had become untenable. The Whitlam Labor government invited Sir Keith Waller to conduct an independent inquiry into Radio Australia. Waller stated unequivocally that

Radio Australia's purpose should be the development of international awareness of Australia and the Australian identity.

(Quoted in Semmler, 1981: 168.)

This endorsement did little to alleviate radio Australia's ambiguous position which has remained problematic. However, Radio Australia is set apart from other Australian media attempts to communicate with Asia because it has broadcast to Asia in a
number of Asian languages, although broadcasting in English has been its mainstay. Its polylinguistic programming in part reflects the BBC’s Bush House broadcasting ethos in the way that the imperial models influenced so many Australian institutions in the period. It also reflects the nascent awareness that Asia mattered to Australia because its position was in reality precarious. It was in part an attempt to establish Australia’s credentials as a regional entity. Moreover, in seeking to project Australia’s identity, it worked on a different agenda to that of the journalist/correspondents who reported Asia to the Australia.

As part of the ABC, Radio Australia was subjected to the same budgetary constraints as any other section of the national broadcaster. Apart from the Whitlam era the ABC has always operated within parsimonious budgets given the scope of its charter to provide comprehensive programming throughout Australia (Inglis, 1983). This parsimony extended to Radio Australia (Semmler, 1981: 169). However, flexibility is one of the principal characteristics of radio. Compared to television it is extremely cheap to operate. Consequently Radio Australia could disguise its comparative lack of funding beneath the patina of professionalism. Its programmes bore all of the trademarks of public broadcasting; measured tones, balance and objectivity. Nevertheless, by the late 1980s the significance of radio as a medium was perceived as declining in the face of competition from satellite television broadcasting.

It will be some time before a genealogy of AusTV can be constructed. However, from public comments associated with its
introduction in 1993 it is clear that the imperfect audience surveys done for Radio Australia suggested that it was losing its audience to television in the form of CNN. The changes being wrought in Asia by the presence of satellite broadcasting were inescapable. Given the importance attached to a vehicle to project Australia into Asia by the Australian government it is not surprising that the presence of CNN and STAR Television elicited a strong response from Australia. This response was articulated by Richard Broinowski who moved between diplomacy and broadcasting.

The perceived decline of Radio Australia presented Australia with an acute problem; how to compete and maintain an Australian voice? Australia had neither the time nor the funds to launch its own satellite. The solution seemed simple; piggyback on an already existing system by renting transponders. Thus AustTV is broadcast into the Asian region via Palapa P2B; a situation whose ironic undertones seem to escape most commentators in Australia given the perceived technological development of the two respective countries.

In sketching this genealogy two points become apparent. AusTV has inherited the lineage. Its ambiguous status is no different to that of Morrison or Radio Australia. Whether it likes it or not it is still linked to the propagandistic and diplomatic. Moreover, it is also linked to a domestic broadcaster that is beset by financial worries in an environment that it is characterised by excess and loss. Further, from this perspective AusTV is not an innovation but a continuation and extension of an ongoing communicative process.
Where it differs is not so much in content or intent but in technology. Satellite broadcasting employs new technologies that expand communicative horizons and create new spatial orientations. It is through satellite television that Australia can project images of its culture to Asia as well as disembodied voices. The question that arise from this changed situation are quite clear: what sort of images should Australia project, and more significantly to whom; and over-riding both of these how much should they cost?

Financing the Imaginary.

Michael Lee, Australia's sixth Minister of Communication since 1989, announced an inquiry into the finances of AusTV (Lewis, 1994:10). Lee wants to examine the "transparency" of the ATVI accounts following concerns that the ABC's recently established commercial activities might encroach on the broadcaster's free-to-air service and other so-called "core activities".

(Lewis, 1994: 10)

The same report points out that "ATVI has been sluggish to build its revenue base" although a number of new sponsors have been gained since January including Thai International, AMP and Coca Cola (Spriggs, 1994: 14). Many of AusTV's problems are financial ones and they stem from three factors: the continuing parsimony of Australian governments towards its international broadcasting arm; the services location within an essentially domestic national broadcasting service where competition for money is intense; and
from the international broadcasters who have also entered the Asian markets.

Australian Television International was established with a one-off subvention of $5.25 million. Thereafter it was to be self-funded through advertising with "no bleeding from other ABC services." (Spriggs, 1994: 14). The grant is now exhausted. (Simper, 1994b: 3) This is matched by a failure to attract sufficient advertising revenue despite attractive discounts offered throughout 1993. The solution has been to run the service on a "'government approved overdraft', overseen by the ABC board.' The projections are that the service will be between $2 and $3 million overdrawn by the end of 1994. The perception is that 'bleeding' will occur unless there is an infusion of funds.

The general lack of money has wide ramifications for the AusTV service. In the first place there is not much scope for making programmes specific to the Asian markets. Consequently the service has adopted a strategy of recycling its library although problems emerged here. These arose out of the high number of co-productions made by the ABC in recent years and the related matter of who precisely he possessed the international broadcasting rights. Some of the programmes the ABC assumed it controlled proved not to be available. A second related problem is the suitability of many of the programmes broadcast. Australian football may delight the tourist but they lack resonance in rural Indonesia. Similarly with programmes like *Lateline* and *This Sporting World*. However, there are insufficient funds to redress the problem, which then feeds the problem of the lack of
advertising revenue. Australian business that has been exhorited to
deal with Asia is reluctant to support the Australian service.

This reluctance stems in part from visibility of AusTV's
international competition. STAR TV, CNN and BBC World Vision
have all entered the Asian markets. Rupert Murdoch's purchase of
STAR is now well documented (The Economist 26 March-1April,
1994 is an example). The problems arising from this purchase are
also well documented and it is estimated that STAR will lose
US$50 million in 1994 (Brenchley, 1994: 15.) STAR'S resources far
exceed those available to AusTV; its programming is geared
towards the economically significant social groups of Asia; it
draws upon a wider range of programme sources; it covers a larger
area of Asia with its footprint thus creating a larger potential
audience. Similarly CNN and BBC draw upon larger broadcasting and
programming resources than AusTV. This fact is not lost on the
advertisers.

International competition will increase in the near future as more
and more satellites are launched, offering a greater range of
services in the region. China's Apstar 2 C-band satellite will cover
the whole Eurasian land mass in addition to parts of Africa and
Australia from 1995 (Fell, 1994: 71.). One possible outcome will
be the migration of the major broadcasters from the smaller
satellite services to the larger. AusTV with its reliance on Palapa
B2P will have a limited range compared to its major competitors.

David Hill, Managing Director of the ABC, is clearly aware of this
hence his deals with cable broadcasters in the USA, the Philippines
and southern China (Simper, 1994a: 56)
Australian television also faces domestic competition. Pay television begins in Australia this month. The dominance of the free-to-air networks of Australian television is about to end. However, the competition will not only come from the sanctioned pay services. PanAmSat, the privately owned American satellite broadcaster has already made application to Canberra for permission to broadcast in Australia (Meredith, 1993: 12). It is difficult to see how the Australian regulated industry can withstand such pressure, especially after Apstar comes on line.

The ABC has sought solutions in the face of this unremitting competition. One possible solution was to seek a further A$28 million from the government (West Australian, 13/11/93). The other has been the overdraft. Finally, the opportunity to broadcast exclusively a high demand programme has been denied AusTV: Kerry Packers' (Australian) Sky Television has been awarded the rights to broadcast Australian horse racing throughout Asia, giving Sky access to a potentially rich source of revenue through ancillary gambling rights (20/6/1994 ABC News.) Given this scenario it is not surprising that the Minister Michael Lee has taken action as the only other possible source of funding for AusTV it appears is to 'bleed' domestic ABC services of their limited funds.

It is clear that financial problems are a significant factor in AusTV's plight, however, these are surface manifestations of a deeper issue; that of cultural identity. The present Australian government enunciates a change in Australia's relationships with Asia but fails significantly to imagine what these relationships
will be - largely because there is no institutional nor cultural base from which to make them apparent.

AusTV as Cultural Sign.

Cunningham and Ritchie (1994) argue in their analysis of AusTV news that

Australia is represented in AusTv News as being already an Asian. Stories which acknowledge it as a country just beginning to come to terms with the rights of its indigenous population, and as one as one which is still perceived in Asia in terms of the history of its operation of the White Australia policy, are wholly absent.

(p. 51.)

They suggest also that this news constructs "stories that distance Australia from European (particularly British) and American influence [which] further contribute[s] to the discourse" (1994: 52). Thus Australia is constructed as "an ersatz Asian nation" (p. 46). In other words what is presented through AusTV news programming is counterfeit, a poor substitute for the real thing - like coffee made from acorns.

The problem with this analysis is that it valorises news, accepting the view that it is news and current affairs that project the "true" Australia. When you compare the volume of news to a complete week's programming of AusTV a different picture emerges. In the week 5th May 1994 to 11th May 1994 AusTV broadcast 186 programmes into Asia of which 41 were news programmes, or 22% of all programmes. However, this figure includes repeats and Radio
Australia news broadcasts in Chinese (sic), Cantonese and Bahasa Indonesian. The other 78% of programmes cover the full spectrum of ABC production from sport, through current affairs to drama and and children’s programming. Thus the overwhelming majority of AusTV’s programmes are embedded in a set of social and cultural practices that constitute a heterogeneous Australian culture. The disjuncture between the embedded nature of most of the programming and the disembedded nature of AusTV news suggests a contradiction, between the reality of the situation (Australia as displaced Europe) and the desire to be Asian. To resolve the contradiction requires a massive shift in Australian consciousness and its power to imagine itself in relation to Asia.

Anderson's arguments about nationalism and the imaginary (1991) have acquired a form of orthodox status in cultural studies because they lend themselves to endless re-workings as the national is reinserted into the critical agenda. (Moores, 1993a) Their flexibility is such that they can be mobilised to analyse virtually any relationship in which conditions are not concrete and specific. On one hand this ubiquity vitiates their power, on the other it provides an incisive and quick entry into a problematic that otherwise becomes clouded in caution or rhetoric. Moreover, they assume a cultural homogeneity and univocality that postmodernism teaches us does not exist. Nevertheless I will take up Anderson's concept of the imaginary and extend it beyond the national into the international in an attempt to make sense of the disjuncture that arises from Australia's "ersatz" Asian status.
Any discussion of Australia's changing relationships with Asia is about the "mapping" of a new cultural geography which is about "the organization of space and time in modern societies" (Moores, 1993b: 369). According to Moores new communication technologies play a crucial role "in the construction of collective identities and 'imagined communities'" (1993b: 366) In part this is achieved through the process of embedding which stresses "the situated nature of consumption practices and cultural objects" (Moores, 1993a: 623).

Programmes like *Lateline* and *Four Corners* are articulated with domestic broadcasting. That is, they are joined to the domestic service through language and a process of economic linkage. The purpose of screening them on AusTV is to expose Asia to certain notions about the nature of Australian political discourse and, in turn, its embeddedness in a democratic political tradition (Simper, 1994d: 10) But the transposition across cultures (the disembedding) to another cannot be guaranteed. The disjuncture between the political and cultural practices of Jakarta compared to those of Canberra is unbridgeable, at least at the level of discourse. The assumed universality underpinning the current affairs and news programming broadcast on AusTv breaks down in the face of cultural difference. By contrast programmes made in England, Canada and USA, within the same current affairs discourse as *Lateline*, can be transposed and frequently are.

Australians can imagine their relations with England and USA for two basic reasons. Firstly, Australian television has always had to negotiate between domestic and imported cultural production
(O'Regan, 1994: 20-21) Australia has always been embedded in a dual cultural process where the media have created a "time-space convergence" (Giddens, quoted in Moores 1993 a: 623),

They have brought individuals and families into the presence of places and events that were previously unknown, enabling them to identify with dispersed yet knowable communities and to imagine themselves as embedded in regional, national and even transnational communities.

(Moores 1993 a: 623).

Secondly, Europe and America are knowable communities because of shared cultural, political and linguistic traditions but more significantly because of the international circulation of images of America, and to a lesser extent Europe, in film, television and pop music. For example, teenagers in Hanoi can imagine an America because they have been exposed to images of America through the mass media. They express their understanding of this imaginary in dress and attitude which then acquires an oppositional status in an officially puritanical Vietnam. By contrast Asia remains unknowable for most Australians because there is little shared knowledge. By and large the international media markets have ignored Asia, with a few notable exceptions. Sensationalists texts such as Asia Exposed (an exploitation video) construct Asia as feminine (through the endless recycling of the sex markets of Patpong), exotic (images of Bali and Phuket), threatening (disasters), unknowable (temples as metonyms for non-Christian ideological and ethical systems) and always other. The knowledge of Asia circulated in the western media can only be seen as partial.
when compared to the detailed and nuanced information about America that is circulated internationally.

AusTV's programming strategies make this abundantly clear. Despite the fact that it has fifty years of Radio Australia's experience to draw upon it persists in imagining its audience in terms of middle class suburban Australia. One has to ask if this is the Australia Paul Keating refers to in his opening address? The weekly diet of current affairs, sport and Parliament Question Time provided by AusTV hardly suggests a robust, imaginative and able nation. On the contrary, it suggests a self-satisfied maturity quite at odds with the desire for dynamism.

Just as Australia has to imagine its relations with Asia so the various Asian nations have to imagine their relations with Australia. The dialogic nature of the relationship is absent from AusTV and until this is rectified the Australia will remain doubly marginalised in the region. Thus it is possible to extend Anderson's notion of the imaginary beyond the national. However, where the nation-state is imagined as sovereign, bounded and horizontal (Anderson, 1991: 5-7), international relations are imagined as culturally determined and hierarchical.

Conclusion.

It is clear that Australian Television International was established with the desire "to construct images appropriate to the state, through the use of national broadcasting services" (Hamilton, 1992: 90.). The appropriation specifically designs a new cultural map in
which Australia features more prominently. At the same time this 'system in process' (Moores, 1993b: 623) is expected to tap into the apparently limitless market for goods and services that characterises the new Asia. The irony is that Australia sought to enter this field without spending sufficient money. AusTV has real financial problems that will not be solved through the raising of additional advertising revenue. If it wishes to compete with STAR, CNN and BBC in the demanding Asian markets it has to be financed along different lines. The government either funds the service appropriately or it divorces the service from the domestic broadcaster and allows it to become a truly commercial service competing for audiences and markets alongside the other major players. The present compromise does neither the domestic nor the international television services any favours. As the Editorial Guidelines (1992) point out "This problem is the price of a genuinely independent overseas service" (quoted in Cunningham and Ritchie, 1994: 47)

However, the lack of money is not the root cause of AusTV's problems. Rather the official parsimony, along with the flawed programming strategies, is a symptom of a deeper malaise. AusTV was established within an orientalist framework (Said, 1978). Underpinning its creation was an assumption that Australia could provide a superior broadcasting service to Asia. No account seems to have been taken of the existing Asian broadcasting systems. The view that Australia could donate its expertise, knowledge and culture to a set of willing recipients reveals an entrenched view of Asia as under-developed and exotic. It is a view that is difficult to change despite the evidence to the contrary. It is embedded in
Australia's extended imaginary that includes Europe and America and excludes Asia.

While Paul Keating and others continue to exhort Australians to look to Asia (Lee, 1993), there is no doubt that the relationships between Australia and Asia have undergone great change. Most marked in commerce and business it is seeping into other areas such as sport where West Australian teams join Asian football and basketball leagues. Nevertheless the fact remains that, overwhelmingly, Australian institutions are not yet equipped to deal with Asia. This problem is made more acute by the Australian media which articulates a world dominated by American concerns, thus undermining the political rhetoric of the push to Asia. Australia is denied the symbols and metaphors whereby it can imagine itself in relation to Asia. The programming strategies of AusTV, reflect this by imagining Asia as an extension of Canberra and speak to it accordingly. Until this changes AusTV will remain marginalised in Asia and Australia will speak in a deformed and muted voice. In other words Australia must learn to speak to Asia in an idiom common to both and reflect it own cultural and ethnic diversity. It must further recognise that a cultural geography is created imaginatively rather than through a pre-determined discourse that assumes a set of assymetrical relationships.

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