Changes to Radio National are gutting a cultural treasure trove

Siobhan McHugh
University of Wollongong, smchugh@uow.edu.au

Changes to Radio National are gutting a cultural treasure trove

Abstract
"RN is the home of big thinking, big ideas, and the national conversation," the statement from ABC management said. It seems odd that, in pursuit of that notion, RN intends to halve the output of its documentary program, Earshot; cease almost all music broadcasting; abort its flagship sound art show, Soundproof, and a short-form storytelling show, PocketDocs; and dispense with the services of respected religious broadcaster John Cleary as well as seven music and features producers.

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The latest RN makeover is largely about talk – a cheap format that costs little to produce. Tracey Nearmy/AAP

"RN is the home of big thinking, big ideas, and the national conversation," the statement from ABC management said. It seems odd that, in pursuit of that notion, RN intends to halve the output of its documentary program, Earshot; cease almost all music broadcasting; abort its flagship sound art show, Soundproof, and a short-form storytelling show, PocketDocs; and dispense with the services of respected religious broadcaster John Cleary as well as seven music and features producers.

Cleary’s show, Sunday Nights, deals with “religion and ethics, beliefs and values, as they shape the issues affecting daily life in Australia and around the world”. Given how much religion has informed the geopolitical landscape since 9/11, it is extraordinary that the ABC would terminate a presenter who is not only manifestly expert in this sensitive area, but whose ratings are also remarkable. Often, they were within a few points of the popular host Tony Delroy, who until recently occupied the slot weeknights.

The new schedule continues the gradual undermining of the specialisation that has been crucial to RN’s output and success. RN producers are often noted experts or intellectuals in their field, with the added virtue of understanding the radio medium.

Their collective output is a cultural treasure trove, which has been increasingly gutted – from the evisceration of radio drama and the loss of top-notch producers and shows in 2013 to the digital-driven remit of today. As Robyn Ravlich, an award-winning former RN producer who still freelances for the network, told me, the best public radio is about much more than talk:

*The value of radio features and other creative forms is long-lasting ... and beneficial in that complex ideas and stories can be told in imaginative ways that engage listeners. They are a necessary adjunct to more topical talk programs, which lose currency and value very quickly.*

*RN should not just be a collection of programs with talking heads that report on what's*
happening. Public service broadcasting has a special mandate to create radio that is artistic and in itself a contribution to culture.

But the latest RN makeover is largely about talk – a cheap format that costs little to produce. There’s What Keeps Me Awake, a talkfest with “high-profile Australians” to be hosted by former News Corp boss Kim Williams; Arts Weekly, “a snappy conversational podcast about the arts”, hosted by Cassie McCullagh. A weekly panel-based show, God Forbid, will discuss religious and ethical issues – but only for an hour, compared to Cleary’s four.

There are positive changes. An Indigenous Unit will be created, along with three junior producer positions. But while hiring young producers could be said to bring fresh ideas and approaches, seasoned staff see it more cynically, as a recruitment of cheap labour.

A toxic atmosphere

So toxic is the atmosphere at RN that none of the RN employees I spoke to for this article would be named. At the time of writing, a meeting of some 60 Sydney staff had passed a unanimous motion of no confidence in RN management, complaining of a lack of consultation about the changes, an erosion of producer control over program content, an undermining of specialist content and a top-heavy management-to-producer ratio.

The changes were announced by Judith Whelan, RN’s new Head of Spoken Word Content – an appointment that senior staff found bizarre, given her lack of experience in audio (she is a former magazine and newspaper journalist and editor).

Corporate-speak has crept into the creative realm, with one manager saying at a meeting this week that RN needed to deliver a “return on investment”. This is a departure from the loftier language of the ABC Charter, which describes “programs that contribute to a sense of national identity and inform and entertain, and reflect the cultural diversity of, the Australian community”.

Recent ABC audience research into podcasts delineates listener demographics by age. Says one RN staffer: “That may work for selling shoes but it does not apply to purveying knowledge.” The push, the staffer says, is for content that is “young, sexy, funny or foodie”.

Much of the tension at RN derives from a division between the digital-first operations of the network (which make podcasts such as the First Run series and ran a popular OzPod conference in September) and the longstanding “linear” RN producers, presenters and sound engineering staff.

The latter resent being portrayed as “fuddy-duddy, leftie conservatives, resistant to technical change”, as one put it, given that, since the days of the crystal set, radio has never been static – and RN has often been ahead of the curve.

While podcasting has enjoyed a much-vaunted boom since 2014, UK media scholar Kate Lacey has pointed out that “radio invented liveness, mass communication, participatory media and mobility”. But what’s old is new, and if podcasting can help RN grow the “30+ digitally-savvy audiences” that, according to a recent memo, “the ABC is seeking to capture” (and garner the desired one in every two Australian listeners), it needs to be harnessed to the hilt.

As part of the changes, there will be new podcast-first offerings: The Edge, a science and health-themed show hosted by polymath broadcaster Natasha Mitchell; This is About – about “the beautiful, awkward and distasteful stuff that
actually happens to people” – and The Real Thing, a show about “real Australia”.

Meanwhile, an internal “RN Production House” will create audio-rich packages to mark significant events, embed content across the network and produce short-form and history-based work as podcasts.

An international success story

Nowhere does the ABC management press release say why there should be a “focus on key specialist talk content”, as opposed to, say, documentary.

RN’s expertise in documentaries and features is world-beating, as its swag of prestigious awards, from the Prix Italia to the New York Radio Festival, shows. This decades-old tradition has been continually eroded, with the earlier axing of lauded shows such as Radio Eye, The Listening Room, The Night Air, 360 Documentaries and Hindsight, RN’s history showcase.

Yet outside Australia, the perception of RN’s features’ success is very different. Former BBC producer and Prix Italia winner Alan Hall, who now runs an independent UK audio production company, says of the changes:

> It appears bizarre deliberately to diminish the ABC’s distinctiveness and quality – in the loss of PocketDocs, Soundproof and much more – at a time when the global nature of the audio landscape has seen a great movement of listeners ... beyond national borders. The best Australian radio production speaks across the world.

Prominent American audio figure Julie Shapiro founded Soundproof in 2014 and is now executive producer of Radiotopia, an independent podcast network in the US, which makes the kind of podcasts whose success RN’s First Run seeks to emulate. Writing of the changes in US public media outlet Transom.org, Shapiro said:

> The loss of Soundproof and what it stands for – honouring creativity and imagination, taking risks, and believing in the power and importance of art in our lives – is everyone’s loss.

Earlier this week, Fairfax Media caused a kerfuffle by reporting that RN was expected to “cease to exist as an on-air transmission by the year 2020”. The story was quickly pulled. Soon after, the ABC issued a firm repudiation. It said in part:

> There are categorically no plans to end linear broadcasting on RN. We expect it to be a full linear service well beyond 2020.

Whelan emailed RN staff “to put to bed once and for all the false idea that RN is slated for a digital-only future”. The idea of a podcast-only RN disturbs many as it would mean less equitable access to its valuable content for those Australians without adequate internet or phone support.

There are other reasons why maintaining RN as an actual radio network is vital. The serendipity of hearing something you didn’t expect to come across, which happens when you switch on a radio but is less likely in a self-curated podcast ecology, is crucial if we are to counter the echo chambers that arguably contributed to the rise of demagogues such as Donald Trump.

Some experienced RN hands see the latest changes as being about something quite sinister – the eventual dismantling of RN. “Digital is only a smokescreen,” one told me.

Others see the promotion of conservative figures such as Kim Williams and Tom Switzer (who has links to the right-wing IPA think-tank) as ominous signs of a political agenda.

It has been rumoured for years that key shows Breakfast, Drive and investigative program Background Briefing might be transferred out of RN to the jurisdiction of News.

If that were to happen – and with production expertise asset-stripped, music performance culled and
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so many features and specialist programs gone or scattered incoherently in a podcast-first sphere –
the undermining of the “big thinking” RN would be well on the way.

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