Representations of the 'region' in Australian radio research and policy

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Abstract

This paper reviews the relationship between regional Australia, its audiences, and radio research in the 20th and 21st centuries by examining the methods by which regional Australia has been incorporated and acknowledged within radio histories, surveys, and research into broadcasting policy. This paper argues that this research has embraced a wider discourse and narrative focused on 'saving' the regions—a sentiment that has been the overwhelming narrative in Australia's social and economic history. It concludes that regional Australia needs to be better understood and integrated into research that has implications for broadcasting policy development.

Keywords: regional Australia, representation, broadcasting policy, radio

Introduction

Regional Australia has been acknowledged as pivotal to radio development in Australia. Notions of 'the region' and the needs of regional audiences were and remain firmly entrenched in broadcasting policy development, which has its traditions in expansionist development policies of early Federal governments. Much of the research in regionality and rurality in Australia was conducted in the late 1990s/early 2000s, a period that followed perceived regional decline. At the time, very little association was made of the relationship between the media and 'the bush', with the exception of a small number of studies. This is problematic because policy development is often oriented towards those in regional and rural areas, and in broadcasting there remains limited evidence that policy is developed from the basis of wide-ranging and comprehensive academic research.

This paper investigates the methods by which regional Australia has been incorporated and acknowledged within radio histories, surveys, and research into broadcasting policy. It argues that research has often embraced a wider discourse and narrative focused on 'saving' the regions—so much so that this has been the overwhelming narrative in Australia's policy development history (see Collits 2004). Finally, the paper questions whether this framing of regional Australia is accurate and helpful when making decisions about contemporary media policy.

What and where is 'regional Australia'?

Regional Australia is a place of great contradictions. It is a place that is exists only in 'relativity'; that is, regional Australia is what it is not. Regional Australia is not metropolitan

(Eversole 2015), although some regional cities are 'urban', and it is not simply 'rural', which traditionally implies a primary reliance on agriculture (Gray and Lawrence 2001; Lockie and Bourke 2001). Indeed, regional Australia is often referred to as simply 'non-metropolitan' (see Beer 2001; Eversole 2015). It is a dynamic and complex place, and has become increasingly diverse: its residents may be miners, farmers, fishermen, government employees, small business owners, or increasingly tree/sea changers and retirees (White and Wyn 2008; Eversole 2015). Discussions of regionality and rurality in Australia are made complex by the fact that Australia's low population density and population distribution generally are very different to most other industrialised countries (White and Wyn 2008): 'The uniquely remote nature of Australian rural communities is a significant factor that, historically, has shaped the mythology of the bush and the experiences of people living in rural and remote areas' (p. 83).

Definitions of rurality and regionality are difficult to establish. While Ian Gray and Geoffrey Lawrence (2001) define rurality as having a primary reliance on agriculture, the Australian Bureau of Statistics considers rurality in general terms from a purely numerical perspective, defining it as a cluster of a population up to 999 people (ABS 2013). Stewart Lockie and Lisa Bourke (2001) add to the definition of rurality, agreeing that it is connected with agriculture (and its association with wide-open space, physical isolation, and self-reliance), but also that it (rurality) is a social construct, to which Gray and Lawrence agree (2001). Rob White and Johanna Wyn (2008) argue for a more complex definition, saying that regional areas need also to be defined as rural: 'A more useful definition is to consider rural and regional areas, which are those areas in which people are living outside of the major cities' (p. 84). This latter definition is useful, as like rural places, regional towns and cities are often socially and physically isolated from metropolitan counterparts, and in many instances the terms 'rural' and 'regional' are used interchangeably. It also caters for those small communities that are not rural in the sense of being agriculturally-based, such as Indigenous communities, generally referred to as 'remote'.

The terminology is important here because bush and rural mythology have played such a profound role in helping symbolise 'what it is to be Australian' (Gray and Lawrence 2001; White and Wyn 2008; Lockie 2000). The terms are laden with myth: *urban* is different from *suburban* and *metropolitan* (see Felton 2002); *rural* is different from *regional*, and also from *remote*. If all these terms are in some way 'constructed', it is the differences at play in these constructions that are of influence. While Lockie and Bourke argue that the simple rural-urban dichotomy is rejected in Australia, 'replaced by four categories: urban, regional, rural,

and remote' (2001, p. 7), Bill McManus and Phil Pritchard (2000) note that the complexities of regional life are reflected simplistically in popular media. They argue while policy development and action may reflect a specific official categorisation, people's understandings of regionality and rurality are influenced by this simplistic representation: 'Indeed, we suggest that the tone of much popular debate on these issues is not only simplistic, but places into the hands of rural populists who have little else to offer in the way of effective policy solutions to genuine problems' (p. 3). Gray and Lawrence allude to the importance of definitions in relation to rurality, for example, by linking the ability and effective application of definition to power: 'The basic theoretical question is no longer "what is rural"', but rather: "whose definition of rurality prevails?"' (2001, p. 50). They argue: 'Rural dwellers have been marginalised and denied access to their own image. This makes it important to consider the reflexive processes through which rural people seek to defend their identity' (p. 50).

These considerations of rural are then intrinsically linked to regionality, which has been arguably demonised in policy terms in Australia. In the late 1990s, regional cities that drew population from rural areas were referred to as 'Sponge Cities' in a Productivity Commission report titled 'Impact of competition policy reforms on rural and regional Australia' (1999). In addition policy scholar Rolf Gerritsen argued that the term 'regional' in Australia was so loaded that it had become a bureaucratic badge-word, included in the title of new program proposals as an aid in the struggle to obtain funding from the federal cabinet and secure the careers of their bureaucratic drivers' (2000, p. 132). While Federal policy foci have changed in the decade since some of this discussion was current, regional issues are still at the forefront of public debate, particularly given the relationship between economic progress, the use of land, and population growth/flow. Being 'regional' in this context is different to being 'rural'.

Regionality should, therefore, be considered a distinct concept. It *is* unique in its relationship with rural and metropolitan Australia. In many cases, regional cities provide the link between the metropolis and rural residents. Regionality is something that emerged as economic focus turned to the cities as life in rural areas became more difficult to sustain (White and Wyn 2008). Regional places have a 'dependency' on metropolitan Australia (Gray and Lawrence 2001; Gerritsen 2000), and it is the physical, social, and cultural aspects of this regional/metropolitan relationship that are the fundamental issues for regional Australia (see Gray and Lawrence 2001). However, not being distinctly rural, albeit distinctly

urban, regional Australia sits in a marginal space. Regions exist in the 'fringes'. Where we have a regional city, it is still the 'other' type of city, not quite diverse and open enough to be cosmopolitan (see Malpas 2009) or indifferent and large enough to be metropolitan. With this physical reality comes social impact, and the 'otherness' of being 'regional' extends beyond the physical isolation that comes with regionality in Australia. As noted by Robyn Eversole more recently (2015), being regional is as much a cultural distinction as it is geographic.

'Saving' regional Australia

This 'otherness' has been considered in generally negative terms culturally, and 'saving' the regions has been the overwhelming narrative in Australia's social and economic history. Since the early 2000s, regional and rural Australia has been a 'problem' for governments to solve (Beer 2001; Collits 2004; Eversole 2015; Gray and Lawrence 2001; White and Wyn 2008). This discourse of rural and regional crisis became pervasive, according to Neil Argent and Fran Rolley, 'through the agency of a media easily satisfied with the simple dichotomous imagery of "city" and "bush", "core" and "periphery"' (2000, p. 141). This arguably simplistic rural/urban dichotomy has been evident from the outset of sociological study internationally. For instance, Lockie and Bourke state: 'Industrialisation and urbanisation were identified as the quintessential features of modernity, reflected in among others Durkheim's division of labour, which marked rural communities and small-scale agriculture as residual social categories (the "other") marked by backwardness, conservatism and, inevitably, decline' (2001, p. 11). Gray and Lawrence also note this, referring to Marx's depiction of rural people being 'left behind' on the road to industrial capitalisation (2001, p. 48). In an Australian political context, this was specifically addressed by the emergence of the term 'two nations' by then Leader of the Australian National Party, John Anderson, to refer to the regional decline as a result of technological change (McManus and Pritchard 2000).

This dichotomy has been dynamic. When the notion of the 'rural idyll' was linked with 'the bush', the city's links with industrialisation also brought with it links to overcrowding, danger, poverty, and struggle. More recently, the link to poverty and struggle became associated with the bush, while the postmodern city became 'celebrated, promoted and regulated as one of diversity, inclusivity and liveability' (Felton 2002, para 10). The city became 'desirable, uber-cool: sexy' (Felton 2002, para 4), facilitated by the 'proximity of strangers' and ability to reinvent oneself because of relative anonymity. Emma Felton's analysis of the city is representative of the tendency within Australian cultural studies (in

particular) to focus primarily on the urban/suburban/cosmopolitan/metropolitan environments. Ultimately, rural and regional studies have been conducted from a predominantly sociological perspective, although the rural/urban dichotomy has been seen in film and television studies in Australia.

The dichotomy between rural/regional/urban 'places' in Australia is reinforced by understandings of cosmopolitanism. Some of the complexities of cosmopolitanism and its relationship with parochialism in Australia were explored by Jeff Malpas (2009), who highlighted the tension in the relationship between parochialism and cosmopolitanism in his review of the Cronulla riots in Sydney in 2006. Malpas' argument was related to the idea of 'branding cities'. While regional cities arguably have a more universally applied or understood brand based on their 'otherness' to metropolitan centres (as discussed earlier), the following statement also applies:

> The branding of cities may thereby be seen to instantiate a tension between a form of cosmopolitanism and a form of what we may call 'parochialism'. On such an account, cosmopolitanism refers to the prioritisation of a global, universal perspective in which local, regional, and national boundaries are of only secondary (if any) significance, while parochialism, by contrast, involves prioritizing a perspective based in some specific locale. (Malpas 2009, p. 192)

The question therefore arises: If being cosmopolitan is based on looking beyond allegiances to the local, does it mean that allegiance to the local over being a citizen of the world mean that you are 'not cosmopolitan'? This relationship between parochialism and a wider 'global world view', and the potential for social and political exclusion, therefore, has driven the need and desire by regional residents to 'resist'.

Gray and Lawrence (2001) address this in specific detail, acknowledging that while resistance in some way supports and reinforces the place of regional Australia, levels of resistance at a community level have been successful (see also Eversole 2015). Warwick Mules (2005) examined regional resistance from a cultural perspective when he argued that resistance flourishes in marginal space, and bringing with it the potential for innovation. Phil McManus and Bill Pritchard (2000) argued that the sense of resistance in the bush increased in Australia after the 1996 Federal elections with the rise of many independent rurally-based political candidates, including Pauline Hanson, noting that the intense media coverage of the Hanson case was in fact one of the few direct links between broadcasting and regional studies that attracted academic attention (see also Lockie 2000).

Ultimately, the key question is: Just how much do we really know about regional Australia? Stewart Lockie has argued that our knowledge of rural and regional Australia in statistical terms is 'overwhelmingly dominated by the collection of agricultural production and financial statistics' (2000, p. 23). Despite this lack of specific knowledge, we know (or think we know) a lot about rural and regional identity. The predominant image of the 'bush' in Australia is that it is white and male (Gray and Lawrence 2001), and there have been many studies in relation to this in literature and art. There is much insight to be gained, however, in examining representations of regionality in other culturally oriented areas. Television shows, for example, promote regional towns as being somewhat idyllic, in keeping with the notion of countrymindedness[1] and the 'rural idyll'. Although it has now been a while since regional Australia was featured on mainstream television in dramatic form, programs such as *A Country Practice*, *Blue Heelers*, and *Sea Change* were long standing and popular; based on stories occurring in a rural or regional location; and produced for consumption by an urban audience. In learning to deal with the regional environments, the characters in these series are seen to ascribe to the values associated with living in the country—they became more friendly, more helpful, less stressed, and ultimately happier. These images are reminiscent of those promoted in radio serials such as *Dad and Dave* earlier in the century (Howden n.d.; Potts 1989), and reinforced today in the long-running radio program *Australia all over* with Ian McDonald on the ABC (Australian Broadcasting Corporation).

Film constructions of rural and regional identity in Australia, however, have tended to be vastly different, and have dealt with the rural/urban dichotomy much more directly. *Malcolm*, *Gallipoli*, *Razorback*, *Sunday too far away*, *Mad Max*, *The Adventures of Priscilla Queen of the Desert, Wolf Creek* and *Wolf Creek 2* are all examples of films that rely on the Australian outback or regions for contrast and plot support. While in some cases, the representation of the bush is more closely aligned with the 'rural idyll', in most, rural or regional Australia is harsh, unforgiving, something to be battled with, and something that makes the protagonist struggle for survival. It is difficult to consider an Australian film that was simply set in a rural town or regional city, without this being fundamental to the storyline.

This view of non-metropolitan Australia as harsh is not confined to film and literature. It is also reflected in the media. Anne Tannock, in her study of regional news coverage in metropolitan (and therefore arguably state) news television bulletins, noted that coverage of regional events and issues was overwhelmingly negative (2001). Her findings concluded that coverage involving regional areas of the Gold Coast and the Sunshine Coast, which were

closer to Brisbane, were more positive in general than coverage of events in places located further away. In the more isolated regions, over one third of coverage was related to crime or court, and Tannen also highlighted the number of 'news blind spots'—that is, areas from which no news is ever reported. In this sense, the regional is therefore the 'unknown'. In terms of radio studies, this remains true, with systematic and detailed studies of regional radio rare, as will be discussed in the following section.

Regional radio in Australia

In most of the significant research conducted into regional Australia's economic and social impasse during the late 1990s (Gray and Lawrence 2001; Lockie and Bourke 2001; McManus and Pritchard 2000), no mention was made of access to broadcast media, although 'telecommunications' including phone and internet services are considered in some form. It is also interesting that in the abovementioned depressed and contracting social and economic context in which regional Australia found itself in the late 1990s, investment in the regional radio network became so attractive.

The existing body of radio research that contributes to knowledge about radio practice and development is consistent in its approach to regional radio in Australia. Discussion about radio development as progress and contributing to nation and citizenship development directly supports the idea that regions are isolated and need to be connected. Radio as a private-sphere activity also addresses the need for connection with an 'outside world', and local histories of radio (commercial, community, or public service) which reinforce radio as community also have the potential to conceptually link 'region' and 'parochialism'. There is no intention here to list every survey or piece of research relating to radio in Australia; rather, the intent is to examine themes, major issues, and trends in radio research that has addressed (or ignored) regional issues.

Location and the development and deployment of Australian radio are conceptually inseparable, particularly in relation to the ABC and its role as a nation-builder and citizen-maker (see Burns 2003; Dunn 1997; Mackay 1957; Martin 2007; Wilson 1999). From the outset of the introduction of wireless broadcasting technology into Australian society, there was a push to broadcast to the country from city centres, but the physicality of Australia (i.e. its size and subsequent population distribution) was always an issue. Phoebe Thornley's PhD study into Australian broadcasting policy noted that early Australian governments were not prepared to allow commercial imperatives to drive broadcasting services, partly because the scattered nature of the rural population made this an unviable proposition, and they were

preoccupied with the development of a national system (1999). Helen Wilson argued, specifically in relation to the development of the ABC, that the ABC's policy history was 'shaped by rational considerations of population distribution, the resources available, transmission patterns, and geographic factors' (1999, p. 102). Despite the relationship between radio and region, there has been relatively little in the way of academic research into how this relationship works 'on the ground'.

Thornley's 1999 study highlighted the continued neglect of small rural communities, the suspicion of commercial motives, and the lack of 'local voice' in regional areas as broadcasting policy developed in Australia. Examples that support this include the post World War II Chifley Labor government's reluctance to grant commercial licences to providers in rural areas where a commercial service could have been a viable alternative. This was despite the fact that the expansion of the ABC at the time 'completely neglected those people living in small rural communities, who had no services at all, for whom a small local service really was a necessity in post war Australia' (Thornley 1999, p. 71). This was evidenced when Sydney stations were able to increase their power to broadcast into areas such as Gosford and Bowral, while, at the same time, licences from applicants in those areas were refused (Thornley 1999). Thornley argued that despite commitments by the Menzies government (1949-1966) to ensure that broadcasting was provided as an essential service to meet the needs of all Australians, the results were 'diametrically opposite' to that which it professed: 'Protecting the viability of existing commercial operators by allowing them to increase their power output was a very poor way or expanding the availability of commercial radio to meet the needs of regional and rural Australians.' (p. 87)

As radio expanded to the country, particularly through the expansion of national broadcasting, there is also evidence that rural listeners objected to the 'top-down', educational approach taken by that national service (Thornley 1999). Rural listeners sought local information, rather than anything 'purporting to be national culture' (p. 58), and increasingly agitated for better local services. Thornley here makes a distinction between regional and rural listeners, noting that regional communities were the recipients of expanded broadcasting services. These issues relating to rural and regional broadcasting remain current today, although more recently commercial licences have been granted on the FM band in regional areas (albeit not the smaller rural communities).

Thornley's study is consistent with early research that consistently indicated that radio played a more important role than television for those living in the more isolated parts of

Australia (Australian Broadcasting Tribunal 1978, p. 3). *Television, radio and the public: A rural perspective,* a 1978 study into the use of radio and television by rural populations, analysed the role media played in the town of Ayr, North Queensland. It revealed the important role of radio in the lives of rural people, who considered themselves a minority group and felt that they were better catered for by regional stations, which were 'along with newspapers…the most important source of local news' (p. 11). Some of the findings of the survey included: older people were more likely to switch to different stations on a regular basis; younger people were more likely to listen to a particular station; - those who were frequent listeners listed 'company' as the reason for listening; younger people were more interested in pop music, and older people were more likely to listen to the station which they considered had more local news (p. 11). While this research is now over thirty years old, the findings remain relatively consistent with the more recent studies to be discussed below and serves to reinforce the link between the region, community, and being 'local'.

The 1990s saw an emergence of interest in radio research, particularly within Federal Government circles and supported by the Australian Broadcasting Authority (ABA) (as the regulatory authority was known at the time). *Music, new music and all that: Teenage radio in the 1990s*, (Cuppitt et al. 1996) was released in 1996 as a substantial report that brought together findings from a number of sources with a view to analyse the state of teen radio. While some of the original sources on which the report was derived comprised regional areas, the overall focus of this report was on metropolitan listeners. However, one of the significant findings at the time was the influence of Triple J on the teenage listening group (Triple J was expanding nationally at the time). The simultaneous and future expansion of commercial radio into regional areas was also noted as being of potential consequence. The report did note a difference in satisfaction with radio services between metropolitan and regional listeners: 70 per cent of metropolitan listeners rated radio services as good, as opposed to 46 per cent of regional listeners.

Also in 1996, what became known as the Mansfield Report was conducted into the ABC, the first external review of the ABC since the Dix Report in 1981. Regional services had always been fundamental to the national broadcaster's operations. This relationship with rural and regional Australia was restated in this report whereby Bob Mansfield called for a revised ABC Charter that recognised that the provision of services to youth and regional Australia should be a programming priority (1997a, p. 9). Probably the most significant report into regional radio since this report has been *Local Voices: An inquiry into regional radio*, which

was a 2001 report by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Communications, Transport and the Arts. This report highlighted the decline in local programming as a result of consolidation of ownership but was released at the same time as there was a massive regional expansion in commercial radio through the FM band. The impact of this consolidation of ownership on regional listeners was addressed in *Content, consolidation and clout* (Dwyer et al. 2006), which was a Communication Law Centre report into the impact of media consolidation on regional media services. This latter report, however, is arguably flawed in its methodology, focusing on only four regions, and interviewing only 24 engaged listeners in its attempt to 'examine audience views about programming, understand community concerns about radio content, and determine community awareness of the process for making complaints' (p.3). These reports, again, focus on the need for 'being local' as being essential to regional 'community'.

Radio content was also examined in *Understanding community attitudes to radio content*. This was a large study undertaken on behalf of the Australian Broadcasting Authority (ABA) post the 'cash-for-comment' scandal that embroiled talkback hosts John Laws and Alan Jones in controversy over undeclared announcements on behalf of personal sponsors. The research conducted in 2003 aimed to review Commercial Radio Codes of Practice and program standards relating to disclosure of commercial agreements. It involved eight focus groups and more than 1200 random phone surveys (2003b). Some interesting findings in relation to regional radio listeners were that despite criticism 'about the reduction in local content available on commercial radio to some parts of regional Australia…regional listeners were generally positive about networked programming provided that it was relevant and of interest' (p. 37). Listeners indicated they liked a more national or international perspective at times, particularly in relation to news, but were not tolerant of programming perceived to be irrelevant (such as weather bulletins specific to another town or city). Most interestingly, commercial radio listeners residing outside capital cities were more likely to consider the local news and information provided in their area to be the right amount. The provision of local news and information was also seen, unsurprisingly, as most important to those living in regional areas (p. 32). More recently, Tom Loncar revisited the *Understanding community attitudes to radio content* survey in 2009 for the Australian Communication and Media Authority. He surveyed more than 1500 people about their radio listening habits but limited attention was paid to regional listeners as a specific group in his report (Loncar 2010).

These government-sponsored reports have been complemented by a number of doctoral studies focusing on regional radio. Kitty van Vuuren's thesis on community radio in regional and remote areas examines the specific influence of local environments, and some of the complexities associated with this (2003). Van Vuuren's thesis compares three community stations, based in northern New South Wales and Southern Queensland, and examines how they foster community participation. The impact of seemingly subtle local community factors, such as demographics and location of the towns in terms of proximity to others, were significant. Fiona Martin's investigation of the ABC's digital revolution also spends some time considering notions of regionality and Martin's findings suggest that, at least in the mid-2000s, metrocentricity was alive and well within the ABC (2007).

Research from a cultural or social perspective considers that regional Australia is consistent in its approach. Themes of isolation and community are at the core of discussions about the role and development of radio in this regard. Leigh Edmunds conducted regionally specific studies that confirmed the cultural importance of radio, or 'cultural glue', in regional Australia (1999; 1994), and this was reinforced in Griffin-Foley's history of commercial radio (2009). The role of radio in bringing the outside world in (Johnson 1988; Edmunds 1994; Mansfield 1997a) is consistent with the earlier arguments that regionality is linked conceptually with the need to be 'saved' or 'educated'. Helen Wilson's problematisation of space and place in regional radio, arguing that radio has multiple spatialities, is one of the few examinations of the clash between virtual and physical space as a conceptual problem (1999). Validating this conceptual argument with empirical research is, to my knowledge, non-existent.

Ultimately, in reviewing the span of research, some points stand out: the lack of substantial change in social uses of radio over this period, and the consistency in requirements by regional users of their accessible media. The major change for regional and rural populations in radio access and use has been in the level of choice available: in the period since the Mansfield Report, this has expanded in some areas, such as along the east coast of Australia, and contracted in others due to the impact of networked services. This lack of choice is primarily linked to the tyranny of distance and the physical inability of a radio transmission to be heard in another area.

Despite significant challenge from traditional and new media sources over the past decade, regional radio has remained economically healthy. In 2003, an Australian Broadcasting Authority report into commercial radio noted that the most dramatic growth in commercial

radio was in the number of regional commercial stations, which increased from 114 to 205 (2003a, p. 12). The report also noted that regional stations were more profitable than their metropolitan counterparts (2003a, p. 15), although listening to AM commercial stations in regional areas was declining. Finally, the report noted that regional radio had the highest proportion of local advertising revenue of any broadcast media (p. 23), with over 70% of advertising on commercial regional radio being local (p. 23). This report preceded the ownership changes during the mid-2000s, with DMG and RG Capital Radio dominating regional radio in Australia until bought out by the Macquarie Bank group to become Macquarie Regional Radioworks, but the growth in regional and remote broadcasting has continued into the 2010s. More recently, as the Federal Government's 2014 review of funding to the ABC and community broadcasting sector suggests, questions about access to regional media will continue, but it is the relationship between media within regional settings that remains relatively unknown. In a 2012 review of influential regional research, the Regional Australia Institute highlighted the issue of negative and stereotypical representation of regionality within the media, but notably, there were was no inclusion of specific research into media use of any kind (social, traditional, broadcast, print) in its list (2012).

This is relevant to policy development. In 2012, the Broadcasting Services Amendment Bill (Regional Commercial Radio) was introduced to amend 'various provisions in the *Broadcasting Services Act 1992* (the BSA) that relate to obligations imposed on regional commercial radio broadcasting licensees in relation to local content, local presence and local news and information' (Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, 2012a). The basis of this decision was to 'reduce the regulatory burden on regional commercial radio broadcasters that results from legislative requirements to maintain existing levels of local presence, to provide minimum amounts of local content and to meet minimum service standards for local news and information' (Parliament of Australia, 2012a). Discussion on the Bill was limited, but amendments were made that limited the effects of the Bill to regional racing services, remote licences, and trigger points (Parliament of Australia, 2012b). While we can argue on principle for what this means, the point here is that there remains limited research into how decisions such as this impacts regional audiences. We know local content is important and made relevant within programs by callers and presenters (Ames 2012), but more qualitative analysis that links policy implementation and representations of regionality would assist in better understanding the needs and impacts of decisions made on behalf of regional communities.

Conclusion

This paper has reviewed what it is to be regional. It has considered issues associated with this representation and the way in which being regional is problematised in an Australian context. It has argued that the amount of academic research into radio within a *specifically* regional framework in Australia has been relatively minimal. While there have been a number of significant attempts by the relevant broadcasting authorities to research radio, these studies have been quantitative, and therefore consistent with Lockie's argument (2000) that research into regional issues has been statistically based. Qualitative, content-oriented research in relation to regional radio, for example, is almost non-existent. Where regional radio has been considered in general radio research, links to themes of isolation, progress, and community (or being 'local') are overwhelmingly dominant, and are consistent with negative understandings of regionality generally. Regional policy can't be developed without consideration of how people connect and communicate. As noted by Beer et al, 'Australia has become a land where regions matter' (2003, p. 1). The challenge is to turn this around and challenge the metrocentricity of radio (and more broadly broadcasting and media) research and policy development.

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Notes

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[1] Gray and Lawrence refer to 'countrymindedness' as a subset of rural ideology: 'Countrymindedness, although based on perceptions of farming, goes further by contrasting country and city. It envelops town as well as farming populations since it counterposes rural and metropolitan Australia as interest groups in conflict' (2001, p. 73). This countrymindedness became integrally linked with the political Country Party, subsequently the Australian National Party.