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FORGOTTEN HISTORIES: EPHEMERAL CULTURE FOR CHILDREN AND THE DIGITAL ARCHIVE

Abstract

The history of children’s popular culture in Australia is still to be written. This article examines Australian print publication for children from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries, together with radio and children’s television programming from the 1950s to the 1970s. It presents new scholarship on the history of children’s magazines and newspapers, sourced from digital archives such as Trove, and documents new sources for early works by Australian children’s writers. The discussion covers early television production for children, mobilising digital resources that have hitherto not informed scholarship in the field.

This article details scholarship on ephemeral genres within children’s media that have not yet been systematically researched. Children’s literature within print culture, and children’s electronic media, have rarely been explored as constitutive components of ‘the national’ in histories of the Australian press or television. This lacuna can partly be ascribed to issues of preservation, since ephemeral media have not enjoyed the careful collection, archiving, and print or digital indexing that have made the study of British periodical literature a thriving sub-field of nineteenth-century literary studies. It is also partly to do with the de-prioritisation of children’s genres and artefacts in institutional knowledge systems and the archival projects of libraries and other cultural institutions.

Looking at children’s magazines and newspaper ‘children’s pages’ in the wake of digitisation projects, such as the National Library of Australia’s Trove, reveals that many of these ephemeral objects have now been indexed, and thus made more easy to interrogate using appropriate search terms. Trove’s digitised periodical interface also features a page-view tool. Publications can be viewed in their original layouts, allowing the study of typography, the juxtaposition of topics and genres, and the placement of advertisements that situate the contemporary child readership within a larger material culture. Such projects facilitate study of ‘new readerships’ – as heralded by the title of a digital collection of British periodicals for women and children recently launched for the academic market by one commercial e-publisher, Gale Cengage.

In the case of children’s television, preservation of early exemplars has also been haphazard. Prior to the advent of video and other recording technologies, many formats were broadcast live to air and have simply disappeared. Recovering these ephemeral histories is indebted to contemporary print sources, such as interviews with production staff and on-air talent. More recently, fan and industry websites have appeared that retrospectively archived records, and in some cases video clips, from early children’s television. Alongside the archival apparatus of repositories such as libraries and the National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA), this ‘grey literature’ is vital in reconstructing the history of Australia’s children’s television culture. Thus increased accessibility of...
digitised collections devoted to a range of media allows scholars, for the first time, to begin to write a more systematic narrative of Australia’s historical print and screen media for children.

Broad circulation of print media in Australia arguably commenced with the publication of the first local newspaper, *The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser*, in 1803. Though often transient in nature, locally produced newspapers and periodicals appeared in ever greater numbers over the course of the nineteenth century. These were crucial locations for new writing in Australia during the period, as the influx of imported titles, along with a relatively small population, meant that the book industry in Australia was slow to take root (Webby, 2009). This was even more the case for material specifically aimed at children: it is recorded that the first children’s book printed and published in Australia – *A Mother’s Offering to her Children* by Charlotte Barton – did not arrive on the scene until 1841 (Prentice and Bennett, 1992). Writing for children in newspapers and magazines, including the serialisation of fiction, is even less well documented. However, the Australian Newspaper Digitisation Program has now scanned a range of early publications. Its optical character recognition (OCR)-generated text, together with title and publication indexing, now offers researchers the ability to perform keyword searches for authors, titles and tags such as ‘children’s pages’. Available on the Trove platform, these digital resources should facilitate further research in this field – which has long lacked the bibliographical resources that have underwritten the burgeoning study of British Victorian periodical literature.

Young people were specifically addressed as readers in Australian newspapers and magazines from the latter part of the nineteenth century. Children’s sections began to be included in many newspapers from as early as the 1870s, developing into important vehicles for writing aimed specifically at younger audiences. In South Australia, the regional *Farmers’ Weekly Messenger* initiated a children’s section around 1874, while the larger *South Australian Chronicle* followed suit with its column entitled ‘Little Folks’ (State Library of South Australia, 2010). However, the practice of writing for children in Australian newspapers really expanded in the early twentieth century. Between the wars, many publications featured dedicated children’s pages. Examples include ‘Our Children’s Page’ conducted by Auntie Nell in Perth’s *Daily News*, ‘Children’s Corner’ by Uncle Jeff in the *Albury Banner and Wodonga Express* and Aunt Kath’s ‘Children’s Section’ in Lismore’s *Northern Star*. Some of these, such as the ‘Magazine and Children’s Section’ of the *Murray Pioneer and Australian River Record*, were regular sections published on specified days of the week. The edition of Saturday, 27 June 1925, edited by ‘Mopoke’, includes a column of local events, puzzles, letters and short original serial fiction and poetry (*Murray Pioneer*, 1925).

The novelist Ethel Turner was one prominent writer who began as a contributor to children’s pages, in Sydney’s *Daily Telegraph* and *The Bulletin*, and by editing the ‘Children’s Page’ of the *Illustrated Sydney News* in 1893 (Niall, 1990). She also edited ‘The Children’s Corner’ for the *Australian Town and Country Journal*, one of the first broadsheets to feature a child-specific space. Turner also contributed romances for adult women and, with her sister Lilian, edited a sixpenny monthly magazine, *Parthenon*, from 1989 (publication history from Trove). The sisters’ range of writing across genres bears witness to the conflation of ‘new readerships’ and the association of women writers with children’s issues. Later in her career, as a columnist, Ethel Turner was a shrewd commentator on issues for young people: one example can be found in an article entitled ‘Fifteen and Her Literature’ (Turner, 1905) – a reflection on girlhood, taste and the benefits of readership.
Other important works of youth fiction were serialised in major newspapers: several of Louisa Lawson’s children’s poems from the ‘Dolly Dear’ series first appeared in The Sydney Mail (1907–09) (Rutherford, 1996), and the Sydney Stock and Station Journal (Trove), while Mary Grant Bruce’s A Little Bush Maid (1910) first appeared in The Melbourne Leader (Webby, 2000: 68). In the mid-twentieth century, Irene Gough, a well-known journalist and writer of children’s fiction, became editor of the children’s page in Adelaide’s The Mail.

The publication of periodicals increased exponentially in the latter part of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century. Prior to this, the establishment of a local literary culture had proved difficult in the ease and cheapness of importing materials from overseas, particularly the United Kingdom (Webby, 1981). The Children’s Friend (London, 1824– ), an evangelical publication, was one of the first dedicated children’s magazines. Later international publications, such as the Boy’s Own Paper (1879–1967) and Girl’s Own Paper (1880–1927) were widely read, and were conceived of as wholesome antidotes to the so-called ‘penny dreadfuls’, which were particularly popular in Britain and elsewhere in the latter 1800s (Saxby, 1998: 460–2). Australian fiction for children had previously appeared in general magazines, including those published in Britain. One of the first of many stories for young people related to the Australian goldfields was Frank Layton by George Sargent, serialised in London’s The Leisure Hour: A Family Journal of Instruction and Recreation in 1854 (Muir, 1997: 84).

Searching the Australian Newspaper Digitisation Program database via Trove confirms the findings from research on British youth magazines (Moruzi, 2012) that demonstrates the investments of religious and educational groups in ephemeral publications for youth as well as the diversity of children’s reading cultures. The first magazine for children to be published in Australia was The Children’s Hour (1899–1963), originally produced by the South Australian Education Department. Many stand-alone youth-oriented publications of the period did not enjoy such longevity. For example, The Children’s Newspaper: A Monthly Journal for Young Folks, issued under the authority of the NSW Education Department and published by W.M. Brooks and Co. of Sydney, began in 1899 but ceased production the following year. The Australian Boys’ Paper: A Monthly Journal of Instruction and Amusement for the Boys of Australia, published by W.M. Forster of Melbourne, only ran from 1898 to 1907.

Vane Lindesay (1983), in what is perhaps the only recent piece of academic scholarship in the field of popular magazines, contends that the early 1920s through to the 1950s were the heyday of Australian children’s magazines. Titles appearing at this time include: Pals (1920–27), a weekly publication considered the first Australian boy’s journal; The Fatty Finn Weekly (1934–35), based on the popular Syd Nicholls comic strip; and The Silver Jacket, published in the mid-1950s. From the 1950s, the market for local magazines declined due to an enormous influx of mass-produced comics (and even back-dated magazines) from American syndicates (Lindesay, 1983: 129), as well as – inevitably – the introduction of television.

The heyday of children’s magazines in Australia coexisted with that of radio. While both media were largely overtaken in popularity by television, formats, program styles and marketing ‘flows’ almost seamlessly made the transition from ‘the wireless’ to the ‘box in the corner’. According to Ken Inglis (1983: 15), early radio broadcasts for children followed models from England, with Children’s Hours or Sessions, featuring talks, sing-alongs and storytelling. In the early 1930s, a Melbourne commercial station,
3AW, hosted *Chatterbox Corner*, its presenter adopting the persona of a Ginger Meggs cartoon character, a type of the early Australian ‘bloke’ (Johnson, 1983: 47).

The children’s ‘club’, which invited active listener participation, allowing children to hear their own names on the wireless, quickly became a popular model. The Australian Broadcasting Commission’s *The Argonauts* is the most celebrated and best documented, due to both the reminiscences of prominent former Argonauts, such as Barry Humphries, and publications and websites by former production staff.

The children’s club that had its birth in radio also dominated much early children’s television. Studio-hosted children’s sessions with a variety of light entertainment and storytelling elements featured on commercial mainstream television. The ‘grey literature’ of digital historians has played an important role in rescuing documentation about these largely forgotten programs. Writing on the NFSA blog, Helen Tully explains that the extension of television hours in 1957 to include the 4.00–11.00 p.m. timeslot opened up the children’s market to broadcasters and advertisers: the ‘sponsored afternoon children’s commercial TV show was born’ (Tully, 2012). These programs were local, as were many of the companies that sponsored them. In Melbourne, GTV9’s children’s session, the *Tarax Show*, mixed variety, comedy sketches and exhibitions of ‘young talent’. Tarax was a soft-drink company, later acquired by Cadbury-Schweppes. Other programs from the 1950s include *Peters Fun Fair* (est. 1956), *The Happy Show* (est. 1957) and *Channel Ninepins* (est. 1957) (Tully, 2012). Knowledge in this area relies as much on the print and web publications of former television workers and journalists as on the collection, preservation and indexing functions of public institutions such as the NFSA. For example, the WA TV History portal provides documentary sources for Perth’s TVW7’s productions, such as *Children’s Channel Seven*, alongside the full text of Peter Harries’ 2004 doctoral thesis on the history of commercial television in Western Australia. Harries was a former employee of STW9, and a well-known screen presenter.

As a national broadcaster, the ABC took advantage of centrally prerecording programs, such as its *Children’s TV Club*, for other city markets. Having realised early on that its children’s radio hit, *The Argonauts*, would not make the crossing to the visual media of television, the ABC’s Children’s Department created new programs to compete both with commercial offerings and its own successful radio show, *The Children’s Hour*. These made use of elements suited to the new media, including puppetry, photography and film appreciation (Inglis, 1983: 210–11). The ABC modelled its programs on previously successful formats – not only from the older media of radio, but also from successful BBC television precursors. From the outset, ABC programmers demarcated different audience demographics, with the youngest children well served by the ABC’s puppetry, drawing and live-action segment, *Mr Squiggle* (est. 1959). This long-running show was created and performed by Norman Hetherington, and hosted from 1960 by Patricia Lovell (‘Miss Pat’). Preschool programming included *Kindergarten Playtime* (1957–66). This was replaced in 1966 by a format acquired from the BBC, *Play School*, which remains the ABC’s principal in-house pre-school production to this day. Younger adolescents were recognised as a cross-over audience, and were targeted with light entertainment, popular music programs and, modelled on the BBC’s success with *Dr Who*, science fiction series. Examples of the latter genre include *The Stranger* (1964–1965) (Inglis: 210–11), *Andra* (1976) and two co-productions with Sydney’s ATN7: *The Interpretaris* (1966) and *Vega 4* (1968) (Moran, 1993: 61, 238–39, 473).

Intermedial transfer of successful formats and genres was also a feature of commercial television. It is true that the business model of commercial television ensured a high proportion of imported programming in family genres. Many cartoons and other
high-quality filmed dramas that originally had been produced for US network family viewing – Westerns (Rin Tin Tin) and sit-coms (Gomer Pyle USMC, McHale’s Navy, Bewitched) – became staples of after-school schedules on commercial television from the 1960s to the 1980s. The Walt Disney Company had demonstrated that children could become a valuable demographic for advertisers, consumers of spin-off merchandising generated by its highly successful Mickey Mouse Club (Kline, 1993).

However, particularly at the most recent licensee, Channel 0 (later 10), innovative programming for younger children was noteworthy. The first Australian children’s program to win a Logie, in 1996, was ATV0’s The Magic Circle Club, produced by Godfrey Phillip and hosted by Nancy Cato, with scripts and songs by John-Michael Howson. Eventually axed by ATV0 because of its high production costs (TV Times, 1967, cited at Television.au), its actors and production team were recruited by the ABC for its spin-off concept, Adventure Island.

The ephemeral nature of early Australian television is partly an artefact of the early technology of transmission, where few programs were recorded on film for preservation in station and, later, national screen archives. While the NFSA holds many programs that researchers can access on site, or order on a commercial basis, digital archives such as Australian Screen that are freely available to scholars have tended to focus on a few iconic titles, such as Skippy (est. 1968) and Seven Little Australians (1973), the first drama series shot in colour at the ABC. Inevitably, the context of transmission and reception of children’s television is largely lost.

Conclusion

This article has documented examples from the history of ephemeral genres in Australian print and broadcast culture. Children’s periodical and newspaper publications have to date generated very little interest from historians of the press. There is also a breadth of children’s literature published in newspapers and other publications from the mid-nineteenth century through to the 1970s. The serialisation of such writing and its packaging with other genres of entertainment, information and recruitment of new audiences are yet to be explored. The case studies in this article shed light on the importance of children as emerging readers, audiences, consumers and national ‘subjects’. Along with early screen culture for children, the case of print underlines the importance of new digital archives to scholars in the field, whether institutional or self-published. Taken as a whole, children’s ephemeral genres witness the extent and diversity of young people’s culture and consumer practices. Long forgotten, they deserve a place in more mainstream accounts of Australia’s media history.

References


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