



AUSTRALIAN TELEVISION

—An Interim Report, by IAN K. MACKAY, formerly Supervisor of Programmes, Commercial Division, NZBS, and now Production Manager, Macquarie Broadcasting Service, Sydney

THIRTY-THREE years of well-organised and competitive broadcasting have conditioned the Australian public to accept the fantastic potentialities of television almost without question. Perhaps this was one reason why its introduction to our living rooms was somewhat casual—but let us start at the beginning.

The Federal Government decided that Australia could be best served with two television systems, one controlled by the Australian Broadcasting Commission (non-commercial), the other by competitive private interests (commercial), each operating independently and competing for patronage. The ABC obtains its finance from licence fees (£5 per annum per receiver) and grants from the Treasury, while the commercial stations earn revenue from the sale of time and programmes. Thus, the Australian system of broadcasting has been translated into the television field.

When the method of operating the proposed television service was debated before a Royal Commission, many conflicting viewpoints were advanced, but once the decision was taken to implement a service controversy and general interest appeared to wane. It was as though the public considered that those in charge would be conscious of their responsibility and would operate a service in accordance with the requirements of our society. This indicated a lack of interest that was at variance with overseas experience. There has been no Australian equivalent of the Chancellor of the University of Chicago to say "Under the impact of television I can contemplate a time when people can neither read nor write and will be no better than the forms of plant life," and no one echoed the words of the U.S. educator who thought television might prove—"as dangerous to culture as the atom bomb is to civilisation."

Australian television is confined to Sydney and Melbourne, despite the eagerness of commercial interests to expand to other capital cities. The Federal Government apparently believed that the two services, non-commercial and commercial, should expand together, and as the State was not ready to underwrite a national (non-commercial) service for the other cities, the commercial interests should not be permitted to have the field to themselves. The reasoning

is probably sound, but because of the restriction to a two-city basis, years will elapse before television will become a mass medium, and there is no possibility of its growing as quickly and freely as sound broadcasting in its early stages. Thus, television did not sweep into Australia like a Murray flood—on the contrary, it almost trickled in, and to some extent this affected the calibre of the initial programmes.

Good television consumes talent and programmes at an unprecedented rate, and until production costs can be spread over a sufficiently large number of stations, local programme activity will be limited by economic factors. The operation of additional stations will permit the syndication of programmes by means of network or co-operative affiliations, and programme production can be centralised.

Sydney is the centre for broadcast programme production, but there is evidence that Melbourne television interests are pursuing a more vigorous policy than was followed by their broadcasting colleagues of yester-year, and this will probably mean that syndicated programmes will originate from two cities instead of one. It will be difficult, however, to initiate a vigorous native industry until additional stations are in operation and the unit cost can be reduced accordingly.

From the outset, the two systems presented an interesting contrast. The ABC simply expanded its activities to embrace television, with one station in Sydney and one in Melbourne. The four commercial stations, two in Sydney and two in Melbourne, represented an



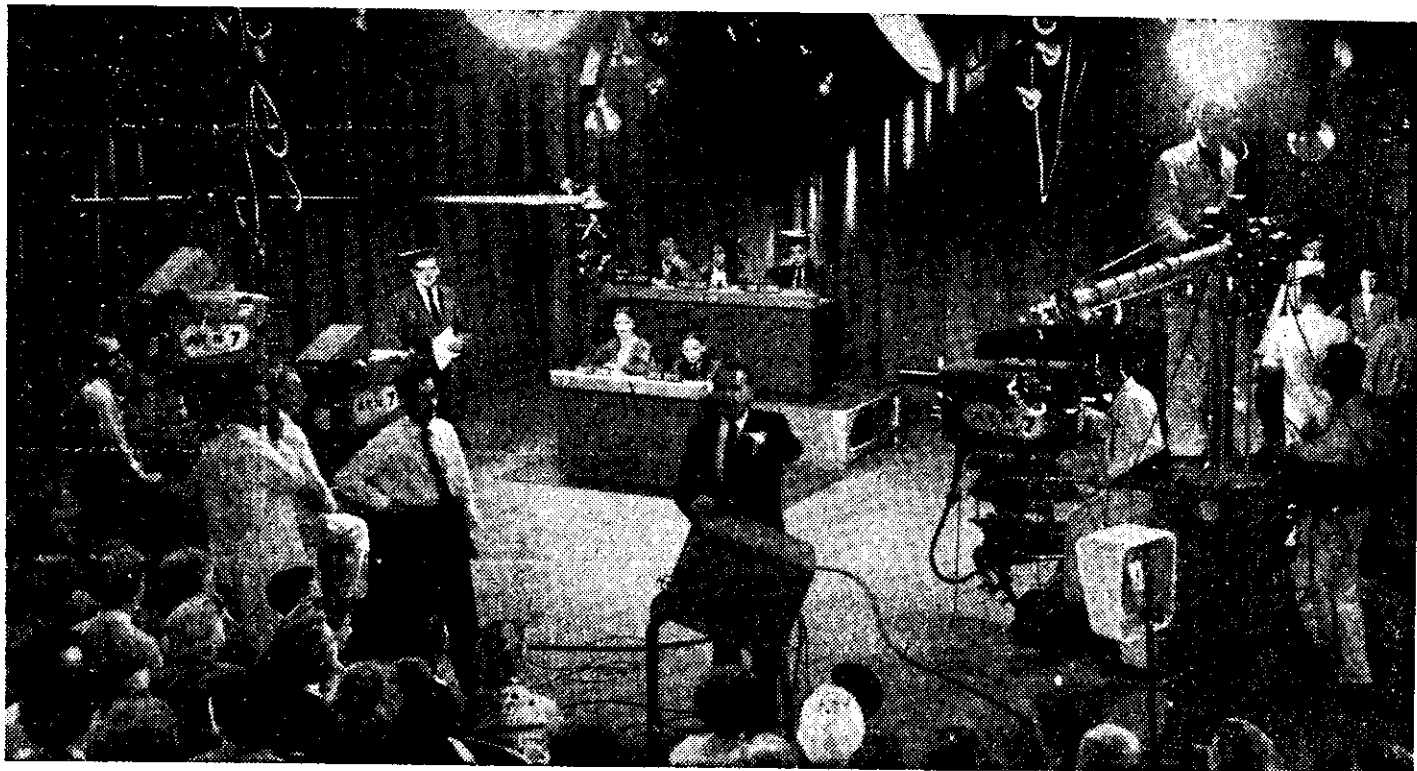
amalgamation of interests comprising press, broadcasting, films, theatre, and electronic groups, but when licences were issued and the interests settled down, it was seen that in each case the press emerged as the dominant factor.

While the four commercial licences were sorting themselves out and marshalling their resources, the ABC went straight ahead with their television organisation. ABC staff were first overseas for experience, schools were established to train Australian personnel and equipment, cameras, etc., were secured before the commercial interests even had a roof over their heads. At least this applied to Sydney, but in Melbourne, under the spur of the Olympic Games, the organisation of both ABC and commercial stations proceeded at an even pace and by a superhuman effort of organisation, portions of the Olympic Games were televised. As a result, television interest in Melbourne sky-rocketed and receivers sold more readily than in Sydney. Thus, in Vic-

toria, television got off to a flying start, and at the most recent count receivers numbered 14,474, against 6003 in New South Wales.

No greater spectacle could have been devised to sell television than the Olympic Games—the greatest gathering in the world's sporting history, when the élite of many countries competed for honours. The television reaction to this spectacle was immediate and stirring, and provided an incentive to the Melbourne operators and home viewers. Even so, it was a Sydney station that instituted the first television service, when TCN Sydney began regular transmission on September 10, 1956. At this point, it is necessary to digress for a moment.

The ABC set about its task of organising a television service undisturbed by any great desire to begin transmission quickly, and safe in the knowledge that the necessary finance would be available. Commercial stations, on the other hand, were pouring out shareholders' money, and there was a natural eagerness to begin transmissions, and thus earn revenue as quickly as possible. The question was, "How quickly will people purchase receivers?" The answer vitally concerned the electronic industry, which would build the sets, and the advertisers who would pay for the commercial programmes. Obviously, there had to be a service available before people would buy sets, and there had to be a viewing public before many advertisers would unbutton their purses, so the commercial licensees were expected to provide the initial programmes. These people wished to keep their sustaining programme costs to reasonable figures, and when the first station opened in Sydney the fare was often vintage films that had been obtained cheaply overseas. The public were not impressed, and in Sydney there was evidence of buyer resistance in the purchase of receivers, which cost between £220 and £260, from which the Federal Government secured £70 in tax. Many prospective buyers



RIGHT: Quiz kids ready to start a "Simulcast"