

Story: Rural media

Page 2 – Radio

V2

(Swarbrick, 2009c)

Radio broadcasts began in New Zealand in the 1920s. At first seen as a fad, but it was soon a necessity. It helped reduce isolation for rural people, and broke down barriers between rural and urban New Zealanders. Town and country dwellers tuned in to the same radio programmes and were drawn closer together.

1921

The first radio broadcast

Nationwide radio

A nationwide radio service started with the vision of William Goodfellow, founder of the New Zealand Cooperative Dairy Company. He saw radio as a way to provide farming people with information, entertainment and community connections. In 1923 he helped found the Radio Broadcasting Company (RBC), which two years later made an agreement with government to provide national radio coverage, upgrading radio stations in Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch and Dunedin. This arrangement continued until 1931. Later, an independent board and then a government department took control of broadcasting.

News and weather

Early radio mostly played music. News bulletins, dominated by matters such as stock and wool sales, began around 1927. Weather forecasts were also introduced at 9 p.m. every night, mainly as a service for country listeners. They included frost warnings in fruit-growing areas, and wind warnings during fruit harvesting times. Briefly in 1929, there was an afternoon forecast for farmers during sheep-shearing season.

Early farming programmes

Farming programmes were first broadcast in Canterbury in 1929, with the help of Lincoln College. At a national conference in Christchurch that year a committee was chosen to help the RBC set up nationwide broadcasts to farmers. It included representatives from the Department of Agriculture and farmer organisations.

Country schools broadcasts

Broadcasts aimed at country-school pupils began in 1931. Students in urban areas also listened to the programmes, which continued until 1987. Separate Correspondence School broadcasts were made from 1937 until 1997.

Rural programming expands

After the state took over broadcasting in 1936, the Department of Agriculture began producing radio talks for farmers. During the Second World War rural radio services waned, but in 1946 they began to grow again. Midday was a popular listening time on the farm, as long as items were kept short. A co-ordinator appointed in 1946 obtained Department of Agriculture talks and syndicated them to stations around the country.

From 1950 the scope of rural programmes widened – for instance, in 1951 readings from *Me and Gus*, comic sketches of novice farming by Frank Anthony, struck a chord with both country and city listeners.



School on the radio



Radio journalists at work



Country life

Big Brother is listening

State control of radio broadcasting sometimes led to political interference. In the late 1930s A. E.

Robinson, chairman of the Auckland branch of the Farmers Union, had a weekly programme. Robinson was allowed to talk on general farming topics – but not issues such as guaranteed prices or union affairs. When he ignored this direction, he was told his sessions would not be broadcast unless they were vetted first.

Heyday of rural radio

By 1953, 17 stations were broadcasting farming news and comment. In 1954 a rural broadcasts officer was appointed in Auckland, and a few years later a 'rurals team' of radio journalists was set up. The independent New Zealand Broadcasting Corporation was established in 1961, and national radio broadcasts began. From this time the rurals team grew, with broadcasters based in provincial centres. They produced material for national and local commercial stations, favouring casual interviews over formal talks.

Farming information programmes from the 1960s to the 1980s included *Rural roundup*, *The country session*, *Green belt* and *Rural report*. *Open country*, which sought true stories about 'people and places out of town', was so popular that newspaper editorials and a public petition protested against its end in 1975.

Reduced services

In 1988 publicly-owned radio stations were formed into a state-owned entity with a commercial focus, Radio New Zealand Limited. The number of rural journalists working for Radio New Zealand fell during the 1980s, and the rurals team and *Rural report* were axed in 1997.

Sowing the seed

Broadcasting is also a farming term: it means the open-handed sowing of seed so it spreads as widely as possible.

Farming programmes today

In 2008, Radio New Zealand National broadcast rural news bulletins on weekdays during *Morning report* and *Midday report*, and a weekly rural programme called *Country life*. Some commercial and public access radio stations also ran rural news and magazine programmes – for example, Southland's Hokonui Gold Broadcasting had an hour-long farming programme every weekday.

How to cite this page:

Nancy Swarbrick. 'Rural media - Radio', Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, updated 1-Mar-09
URL: <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/rural-media/2>