



HUMANITIES RESEARCH CENTRE
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WORK-IN-PROGRESS SEMINAR SERIES

News, time and imagined community in colonial Australia

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This work-in-progress paper is part of a larger study of the history of overseas news in the press in Australia. As well as examining the changing political economy of overseas news production, the study examines the implications of changing patterns of news availability in Australia for local knowledge of, and engagement with, the rest of the world.

This paper discusses matters of time in relation to the history of the press in colonial Australia. In particular, it explores the idea that the colonial press was time bound in relation to two quite different temporal contexts – local time, which governed the production and consumption cycle of colonial news, and ‘imperial-colonial time’ (by which we mean to mark the time lapse arising from news transmission between Britain and her colonies) which governed the production and consumption cycle of ‘home’ news. For settler societies, news of the local and news from home were both deeply salient and were a key mode of engagement with both their local and their larger imagined communities. But the temporal terms of the engagement, as enabled by the communication conditions of the day, were, of course, very different. News from overseas always announced, in tandem with its content, the prevailing relationship in time between distant parts of the world and the colonies and so functioned in society as a prime public marker of this changing relationship.

The focus of the paper is the changing temporal contexts of overseas news in Australia’s colonial press. The history of overseas news – its timeliness, periodicity, and its forms - is enmeshed in international communication history and, specifically, in the history of Australia’s changing time/space relations with the rest of the world as new technologies, particularly the telegraph, became available. From the point of view of editors and publishers, these changing relations presented major challenges of time management. More broadly, these changing relations (often thought of as involving time/space compression) progressively altered the temporality of colonial engagement, both imaginary and real, with the rest of the world as common knowledge of the new came to be increasingly shared within common time frames.

Professor Peter Putnis is Chair of the Media History Section of the International Association of Media and Communication Research and is a past President of the Australian and New Zealand Communication Association. He is a Professor of Communication at the University of Canberra and, till the end of 2006, was Pro Vice-Chancellor of the Division of Communication and Education. His recent publications include: ‘War with America: The Trent Affair and the experience of news in colonial Australia’, *Journal of Australian Studies*, 81, 93-106 (2004); ‘How the international news agency business model failed – Reuters in Australia, 1877-1895’, *Media History*, 12(1), 1-17 (2006); and ‘Overseas news in the Australian press in 1870 during the Franco-Prussian War’, *History Australia*, December (2006).

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