TEACHERS NOTES – Wireless to Web – 1940s

The 1940s saw the continuing growth of radio and newsreel broadcasting as powerful influences in Australian life.

1. Students are to brainstorm their image of the decade. They should summarise their ideas using headings such as Political, Social and Cultural, Economic, and Technological Aspects. They should return to this image at the end of their activities on the 1940s to see if their ideas and images have changed. To begin, students may view the video clips in Snapshots, Programs With Staying Power and Australian Broadcasting Control Board.

2. Two of the key issues in any period of war are the way the war is depicted by the news media, and the nature and role of censorship. Students are to define and discuss censorship and propaganda, and to offer what they think may be examples either from history or that are current. They may wish to provide examples from books or the internet, such as recruitment posters or personal letters that have words blacked out by the official censors.

3. In pairs, one student is to write a newspaper report about how difficult general living conditions are for most people in Australia during World War II, coping with food shortages, petrol rationing, lack of transport, lack of news from loved ones at the war etc. The other student is to act as an official government censor, re-writing the report before it is published in the newspaper. Both the ‘before’ and ‘after’ reports may be displayed on a large wall sheet.

4. Students are to play the first interview with Ray Edmondson, in Boosting Morale, then discuss the role of the media in war. Is it to inform, entertain or maintain morale? Is it to protect the community? Is it to promote the war effort or to provide an alternative source of information to the official government and military message?

As a class or in small groups create a set of rules or guidelines for media coverage of a war situation. Form into small groups, one for each of soldiers, families of soldiers, government ministers, opposition leaders, enemies of Australia, international civil rights protectors and people in the country being attacked or defended. Allow each group to respond in its own way to the rules that have been drawn up. As a class discuss the responses, and whether these media rules should now be modified or not.

5. During the 1940s the ABC was made independent of the government. Discuss why the independence of a national broadcaster would be desirable in a democracy. For ideas on this topic students should access the interview with Liz Jacka in Australian Broadcasting Control Board.

6. While newsreel media production is often seen as factual and impartial in reporting news events, the reality is that visual and aural media are flexible, and subject to manipulation. In the 1940s Cinesound Review and Fox Movietone newsreels produced different news stories from the same source material. Simply by the arrangement and sequencing of shots, and by changing the voice-over and the titles, different stories were produced by each of the two newsreel companies.

Students may explore this very important power of montage (the editing or joining together of different camera shots) in a very effective way using a range of activities, technologies and processes.

The teacher is to collect a set of still photographs, newspaper headline cut-outs, cartoons, magazine images and sketches. Ensure that the images come from a variety of sources and are otherwise unrelated. Photocopy all the elements and provide them as a set to students in groups, each with the same set of material. Without discussion between groups ask students to assemble the elements into a storyboard format of cells to create a news story. How many different interpretations are possible? How many different stories?
Compare and contrast the tone of different stories made with the same media simply by noting their arrangement, layout and the order in which the images are seen.

The exercise may also be performed using digital tools. Using image editing software students may perform the same task with digital image elements, arranging them into storyboards.

The same activity may be extended by using video editing software. Provide each group with the same set of video clips, titles and photos. Ask each group to edit a newsreel video, using only the elements they were given. Compare and contrast the results. Discuss how audience reaction to a story could be altered simply by the arrangement and sequencing of images.

Students are to record a voice-over to the constructed story. They should explore and discuss how meaning and interpretation can be altered with the addition of commentary.

7. During World War II women’s roles changed. Many more women than before were involved in industry, the auxiliary armed services, the police and public transport. The website suggests that while women took on roles in the broadcast media during the war, they were not required after the war.

Students should separate into groups. Each group is to research a different area of women’s war work: the auxiliary services, manufacturing and service industries. They are to ask the following questions then produce a report to the rest of the class:

- What was the employment situation for women before the war?
- What happened during the war?
- How many women came into the wartime workforce?
- Were they engaged in new kinds of work, or doing traditional work previously done by men?
- Did women’s status change with this change in roles?
- Did women stay in these occupations after the war, and did they want to stay?

8. Students may be able to research and put together an illustrated magazine article about the roles played by women during the war, and the types of radio, newsreel, poster and newspaper propaganda designed to bring women out of their homes into the workplace.

9. The end of the war saw a new migration program to Australia. This involved bringing people from countries in Europe that had not been traditional providers of migrants to Australia. The Australian people had to be persuaded that such migration was necessary and desirable. Students should view the video clip in Snapshots and discuss the following questions: How does the Minister for Immigration, Arthur Calwell, try to persuade the Australian people about the issue? How is film used to support his arguments and information? Do you think this would have been a persuasive newsreel when it was first shown to the Australian people? Why or why not?

10. Many students may be able to carry out the following exercise based on their own family’s experience. You are a non-English-speaking migrant arriving in Australia after World War II. Write a letter home to relatives about the difficulties you have experienced during your first few weeks in the country, where all the newspapers, radio programs and films are presented in a language you don’t understand. As a result of your experiences, what do you think of Australia and its people?

11. Ask students to prepare an outline of a more modern version of the video clip of Arthur Calwell, particularly listing the sorts of images they would intercut during Calwell’s speech that might make it more attractive and persuasive to the viewing audience.

12. Radio serials were a popular form of entertainment during the late 1940s. Ask students to play both the interview with Tim Bowden and the video clip, The Invisible Link, in Programs With Staying Power, and to discuss why radio serials were so popular.
13. The video clip, The Invisible Link, in Programs With Staying Power, depicts the making of a radio serial, together with various sound effects being produced. Students are to discuss the idea that radio, with its appeal to imagination, is preferable to newsreels or television, whose pictorial images do not always allow the viewing audience to imagine or to ‘see’ for themselves.

14. As a class, listen to some examples of radio serial episodes from the era — some are available on CD and on internet websites. Students may be able to plan their own serial, to map out a series of episodes that might run for three or four minutes each, write the episodes and record them. They may even be uploaded to the school internet site for others to play back.

15. Write a fan letter to a radio serial star. Students may also prepare, using web page or desktop publishing software, a specially prepared mailout letter or poster from the star.