

# Comment

**H**ow do you cover a Millennium?

Exclusively, of course.

Like everything else in television at century's end, you buy it, you set your cameras up in the best spots, you hang microphones everywhere that anyone might say anything interesting (or everywhere that anyone interesting might say anything at all), and you keep every other mug out.

On New Year's Eve, Australia-at-the-end-of-the-earth will be the centre of the earth. As the Millennium turns, the fireworks on Sydney Harbour will provide one of the globe's most sought-after spectacles.

The Nine Network is battling to ensure it is the only Australian TV network providing live coverage from Sydney's celebrations. It has got a contract with the City of Sydney, which in turn has a contract with a company which puts on the fireworks. Nine spends a lot of money sponsoring the event, and contributes "millions of dollars" towards the cost of the fireworks. Nine and the City of Sydney claim to have a contract giving Nine exclusive Australian broadcast rights to the event, although it is unclear what exactly the City of Sydney is in a position to offer exclusive rights for. Nine, however, is less than impressed with suggestions that the ABC might cover the event.

This would set new heights for the kinds of entities which can be controlled by media organisations. Not just events (sporting contests, a Prime Minister's resignation), or even newsworthy people (Stuart Diver, Shane Warne), but public places and perhaps the passage of time. If you want to see the celebration which, for some, will provide the most striking and enduring image of Australia entering the new Millennium, there's supposed to be only one place on Australian television to do it.

In an earlier era, of course, a television network would have sponsored Captain Cook's voyages and Arthur Phillip's colony. We'd have had stump cams for Benelong and Watkin Tench's daily diaries in RealAudio, all exclusively through NineMSN.

Nine wasn't around when we last saw in a Millennium, or century or even half-century.

It's a creature of the last forty-odd years, since a black-and-white Bruce Gyngell welcomed TCN 9's viewers to what Sydney-siders and others further from the harbour have come to call the beginning of Australian television.

Nine has been "The One" in Australian television pretty much ever since. Not in every year and not in every place, but the dominant force most of the time.

In 1999, 14 of the top 20 rating programs on Australian television screened on Nine. They included 4 sports programs in the top 7 - triumphant moments of global sporting ascendancy (the World Cup Cricket Final and the Pan Pacific Swimming Championships), and traditional, local contests turned national (the Rugby League and AFL Grand Finals). There were slices of Australian life (the movie *The Castle*, *This is Your Life* and *Funniest Home Videos*), fantasies of a better one (*Who wants to be a Millionaire?* and a *Getaway Special* about the *Orient Express*), celebrations for media stars (*The Logie Awards* and John Farnham's 50th birthday) and the end of a piece of Old Millennium Television (*Hey Hey It's Saturday!* final episode).

Nine has had the odd slip, like the recent occasion where one of its pervasive microphones, located to catch every slice of a cricketer's on-field life, got a little too close to one of its owned and operated superstars. (*Leg-spinner?*

## *New Millennium Television*

Camera operator? They all say interesting things if you listen closely enough.) Thank God we didn't have one around Bradman when he was letting people know what he thought of most of his contemporaries, or we'd be down one national hero.

Overwhelmingly ascendant in its programs, the top-rating network is also leading free-to-air television's case for the technology of New Millennium Television, digital television.

Having convinced the federal government to provide Nine and its free-to-air television colleagues with additional spectrum to transmit new digital services from 2001, Nine is arguing for a "high definition" technical standard which maximises the quality of the images and sounds which Australian audiences will be able to receive.

Its opponents - Internet Service Providers, pay TV operators, telecommunications companies and the rest of the computer crowd - say it's typical of broadcasters. Building Rolls Royce's when Mini Minor's will do. New Millennium Nine is saying it's thinking about the future - not just tomorrow, but next year, next decade.

Not everyone who stays up for the century this New Year's Eve will be celebrating or watching the Nine Network. Many will be waiting anxiously for the outcome of the computer industry's last piece of long-term planning - the Year 2000 bug. Airline executives will be spending the night in the air, proving that their companies' planes won't fall from the sky. Sydney's trains, somewhat less confidently, will be off the tracks for 45 minutes.

Over at Nine's headquarters in Willoughby, they will, as always, be supremely confident.

They've got an exclusive on the Millennium.

Y2K? Well, what would you expect from the computer crowd.

Can't bowl, can't throw.

**Jock Given and Monique Williams**