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Term paper

### ***Neighbours* – Good Friends and Good Success**

In the 20 years leading up to 1995, soaps operas were “the dominant form of drama on Australia television screens” (Moran, 344) While that trend has since shifted to serial dramas, there are still two Australian soap operas popular enough to remain on the air. *Neighbours*, the longest running Australian drama ever produced, is a “nightly soap opera exploring the various domestic dramas of the families in a group of homes in an average suburb” (Moran, 270). Originally concentrating on everyday life without a lot of added melodrama, *Neighbours* developed over the years to include such dramatic storylines as bombings and lesbian kisses. Faced with declining ratings, *Neighbours* was refocused in March 2007, moving away from the sensational and back to the simple storylines about family that it began with (Kilkelly). In this paper, I examine the current production of *Neighbours* using the characteristics of the show that made it an initial success, both in Australia and in the UK, and offer a contrasting analysis of the popular, long-running American soap opera, *As the World Turns* (ATWT), to provide insight into some of the major differences between successful Australian and American soap operas. An examination of several key facets that lay the foundation for *Neighbours'* success, and their manifestation (or lack thereof) in the current series of *Neighbours* and *As the World Turns*, demonstrates one of the reasons behind the failure of *Neighbours* in the US market.

To begin my analysis, I watched 23 episodes of *Neighbours* that aired in Australia from the end of November 2007 through the beginning of January 2008, and in the UK from March 3 – April 4, 2008<sup>1</sup>. I supplemented this exposure with episode summaries available on tv.com<sup>2</sup>, and

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<sup>1</sup> *Neighbours* airs in the UK 57 episodes behind Australia.

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.tv.com/neighbours/show/4717/summary.html?q=Neighbours&tag=search\\_results;title;1](http://www.tv.com/neighbours/show/4717/summary.html?q=Neighbours&tag=search_results;title;1)

the occasional glance at the Wikipedia<sup>3</sup> pages of relevant characters, to confirm some of the back story. This, while by no means giving me comprehensive insight into the history of *Neighbours* and the characters, at the very least gave me a brief introduction to the series and a feel for both how the stories are presented and the types of storylines that can occur during a typical month. To this, I compared my familiarity with *ATWT*, bred over watching the American soap opera for more than 3 continuous months beginning in February 2008. My *ATWT* viewing was supplemented by following some additional storylines on Youtube<sup>4</sup> and a wealth of history and back story imparted to me by a long time viewer and fan. I recognize that by limiting my scope to these two soap operas, watched for only a brief period of time, I am not able to provide a complete picture of either soap opera; any generalizations that I make are not necessarily applicable to every soap opera from each respective country. However, the number of episodes I have watched from both soap operas has allowed me the exposure to outline certain apparent characteristics, which I feel would be supported with further study. With their popular and long-running status, both *Neighbours* and *ATWT* are good indicators for audience approval in their respective markets.

My analysis begins with a historical account of *Neighbours*, detailing its start and initial premise. The story of *Neighbours*' first year is filled with rival studios and publicity gimmicks – a bit like a soap opera itself – and sets the stage for *Neighbours*' success. Having established the show's background, I then discuss the intriguing and extreme popularity that *Neighbours* has enjoyed in the UK since 1986. I examine this further through an analysis of several aspects of the soap opera, identified by Stephen Crofts, that seem to have caused *Neighbours*' widespread success. These aspects, supposedly the key behind *Neighbours*' original popularity, help to show

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<sup>3</sup> Wikipedia is a free encyclopedia that allows anyone with internet access to contribute information to articles.

<sup>4</sup> Youtube is an online video website that allows users to upload and watch video clips.

how well the current soap opera has refocused to the original premise. Through an analysis of each of the features Crofts identified, and their presence (or absence) within the current storylines and productions of *Neighbours* and *As the World Turns*, in the episodes I viewed, I outline some of the inherent differences between the two soap opera markets.

*Neighbours*, created by Reg Watson, debuted in March 1985 on Channel 7 as a 30-minute daily soap opera featuring “the tensions and trials of two historically rival families living on the same street: the Robinsons and the Ramsays” (McKee, 238). The large and attractive cast, which over the years has included stars such as Kylie Minogue, Guy Pearce, Natalie Imbruglia, and Russell Crowe, embodied a healthy, youth culture that typified the entire show (Mercado, 202). Created with the goal of showing the “everyday problems confronting the average Australian family,” *Neighbours* was characterized as being much less dramatic than other soap operas, particularly those in the US (McKee, 247). Instead, *Neighbours* was more realistic and down-to-earth, depicting “a safe, community-oriented, non passionate, and non threatening community. White, suburban, working middle class, and with plenty of muscular young men to look at” (McKee, 252). Indeed this non passionate and non threatening community, described by some as ‘banal,’ creates its entertainment in a ‘feelgood’ way, as is best exemplified by the following statement by one of the show’s former producers; “*Neighbours* has its share of sex, intrigue and murder, but it is done in a more wholesome way” (Matelski, 177). This wholesome nature appealed to both parents and teenagers, causing quite the following among the teen demographic.

For an authentic feel, the outdoor neighborhood scenes are filmed two days a week in Pin Oak Court, a cul-de-sac in Vermont, a suburb of Melbourne (Kingsley, 242). Renamed “Ramsay Street” for the purposes of the show, Pin Oak Court is kept with neat driveways, gardens, and swimming pools by the families that really live there. Ramsay Street is, in turn, found in the

fictional suburban setting of Erinsborough (Mercado, 215). The original interior sets were constructed at Channel Seven's HSV studios in Melbourne, and production began in January, 1985 (Mercado, 202). Low ratings in the first few months, particularly in Sydney, caused Channel Seven to decide to cancel the soap opera after less than a year. Rather than ending, however, Channel Seven's rival network, Channel 10, picked up the show – and in doing so, had to create new interior sets. This was due to the fact that Channel 7 refused to sell their interior sets to Channel 10, and instead “accidentally” destroyed them in a fire (Mercado, 203). The new sets were made brighter and more appealing to housewives, and were just one of the changes that Channel 10 made, when it began airing the show in January, 1986, along with replacing a majority of the cast. In order to improve the ratings of the show, Channel 10 uses a large number of publicity stunts. Included in the effort, “[the cast was] tramping the streets and shopping malls of Sydney, presenting competition prizes, taking part in silly stunts, signing autographs, doing anything to persuade people that Ramsay street could be their street too” (Kingsley, 240). These publicity gimmicks proved successful, and *Neighbours'* ratings increased dramatically.

Contributing to *Neighbours'* success was its international appeal. The BBC began showing episodes of *Neighbours* twice a day in the UK in 1986 (Hobson, 14). *Neighbours* dominated UK ratings and at one point rated over 19 million viewers a day. Its success was attributed to the warm weather and casual lifestyle depicted, as well as the fact that it aired twice a day, and was stripped (airing new episodes 5 days a week) (Crofts, 103). Initially airing in the morning and then again in the early afternoon (1:30pm), the schedule was soon changed to air at 1:30pm and again at 5:35pm, which allowed teenage schoolchildren to watch the show. This move captured huge audiences and started attracting 14 million viewers a day (Kingsley, 241). *Neighbours* achieved a cult-like status, immensely popular in part due to heavy publicity. It even

attracted fans within the Royal family, and the entire cast appeared live on stage at the annual Royal Variety Show in 1988 (Craven, 3). While this popularity has continued in the UK, and *Neighbours* has been aired in more than 60 countries, *Neighbours* failed to attract an audience in the United States despite attempts in 1991 and 2004 (Crofts, 108). Its 'foreignness', both in setting and premise, has been cited as one of the reasons behind its failure in the US market. *ATWT*, on the other hand, has aired its hour-long episodes nearly every weekday since 1956, attracting a large base of American fans and dominating ratings in the 1960s and 1970s (Matelski, 41).

So immense was *Neighbours*' popularity in the UK that it was one of only two scheduled television programs to air on January 18<sup>th</sup>, 1991 during coverage of the start of the Gulf war (Crofts, 99). What is it that made *Neighbours* so successful and able to achieve this honor? Stephen Crofts generated a list of 10 things responsible for *Neighbours*' popularity, particularly in the UK. His list consisted of the following: identification with everyday experiences; camerawork; women actually doing things; teen sex appeal; unrebelling youth; 'feelgood' characters; wholesome neighborliness; differences being resolved, dissolved, or repressed; depoliticized middle class citizenship; and writing skills (Crofts, 100). With *Neighbours*' recent plan to revert to the features that made it so popular and successful in the late 1980s, this list provides an excellent basis for comparison.

To set the stage for this comparison, I would like to first explore the opening sequences and credits for the three soap operas; *Neighbours* in 1985-86, *Neighbours* in 2007-08, and *ATWT* in 2008, as they set the mood for each episode. The healthy lifestyle and bright and sunny atmosphere of *Neighbours* is noticeable almost immediately, in the opening credits and theme

song, the lyrics of which have not changed significantly over the years. In the 1986 *Neighbours* opening credits (archived on Youtube<sup>5</sup>), the meandering lyrics,

*Neighbours, everybody needs good Neighbours  
With a little understanding, you can find the perfect blend  
Neighbours, should be there for one another  
That's when good Neighbours become good friends*

are sung as clips of daily activities outside and around the neighborhood cul-de-sac depict family and friends having a good time amidst lush green grass. The idea of the neighborhood is reinforced by the credits beginning and ending with map-like images of streets (one drawn, one satellite image-like), highlighting the cul-de-sac and starting the episode on a 'feelgood' note. While the opening credits and exact song changed over the years, many qualities of that original opening sequence remain in the current *Neighbours* title credits, which have been used since 2007. The song lyrics, updated and edited down;

*Neighbours, everybody needs good Neighbours  
That's when good Neighbours become...  
When good Neighbours become good friends*

are sung at a more energetic tune, as images of the cast on brightly colored backgrounds weave through the screen. Alternating between showing characters happily posing with family members in a photo booth and images of characters interacting over a myriad of drawn settings (on a dock, walking along the beach, canoeing, sitting on the front steps to a house), the current opening credits show all of the cast members happy and enjoying themselves with their family and friends. The idea of the show being not only about neighbors, but friends, is reinforced by the lyrics of the theme song. The credits close with several of the photo booth images propped up in drawn grass, a "Ramsay Street" sign in the background, with the title "*Neighbours*" coming into focus. The happy attitudes of the characters in both *Neighbours* opening credits alone are in stark

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<sup>5</sup> <http://youtube.com/watch?v=TZ0wB72TTg0>

contrast with the opening credits for *As the World Turns*. As dramatic music plays in the background, different characters flash across a rich golden background, with scenes and other characters they are involved with in the background. The opening ends with “*As the World Turns*” on that same golden background. Rather than evoking the feelings of happiness, sun and cheer found with *Neighbours*, the *ATWT* opening is all about drama and being serious, a difference that is translated to the overall feel of the soap operas themselves.

The first aspect that Croft attributes *Neighbours*' success to – that of *Neighbours*' storylines identifying with everyday experiences – is the entire essence of the show. Through *Neighbours*' effort in the past year to go back to this original premise, it is attracting viewers in the same way it did in 1986. These everyday experiences are seen in the young kids, Mickey and Ben, playing together; by the teens going to their swim team practice; by sisters Carmella and Rosie stopping to enjoy a coffee together; and many other occurrences in the daily episodes. And while *ATWT* generally focuses on some of the more sensational or scandalous storylines, viewers are still treated to Carly grocery shopping and Katie and Brad filming at work, their daily activities also on display to a lesser extent.

At the time Crofts made his analysis in 1992, the camerawork in *Neighbours* was set at eyelevel, and used a utilitarian visual style that drew little attention to detail. It had just begun to adopt a flashier style, and that style is seen through the camerawork in episodes today. Attention to detail has become important, as one must notice what the SMS<sup>6</sup> messages on the teens' phones say, and who is standing in the background of a scene, watching and listening to become privy to a secret. Experimentation with camera angle is also quite prevalent, with the camera taking the role of a bystander, viewing the scene through a fence, or through windows, or around the corner of a room. This effect gives the audience a feeling of watching from afar, as if we are actually

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<sup>6</sup> SMS or “short message service” is the term used for “text-messaging” in Australia.

there – not omnipresent and in the scene themselves, but as a bystander on the outside at times. The audience doesn't know everything, which allows some of the surprises for the characters to delightfully surprise the audience as well. In contrast, the camerawork on *ATWT* tends to follow a few standard angles, often viewing one character over another's shoulder and focusing on close up shots that emphasize the emotion, intimacy and intensity of the moment (Timberg, 166).

In the first few years of *Neighbours*, the idea that women can “actually do things” is quite prevalent, seen primarily in the extremely popular character Charlene Robinson, played by Kylie Minogue, working as a mechanic. While the role of a mechanic is typically masculine, Kylie, as Charlene, breaks boundaries, demonstrating that a woman can do a job that isn't generally considered suitable for women. Other female characters worked outside the home, while some men, in turn, work from home (Hobson, 16). This theme is continued in the soap opera today, with another female character in a similar male-dominated workforce. In a recent entertaining scene, Janae Timmins, working as a mechanic at the car garage, is speaking with Darren Stark when he inquires after her boss. She reveals that she is, in fact, “the boss” of the garage, dominating in the typically male position. If we look at recent episodes of *ATWT*, however, there are no real female characters with masculine jobs that require them to get their hands dirty, as with Charlene and Janae on *Neighbours*. And while Margo Hughes may be in a male-dominated field as a police officer, female cops are relatively commonplace and she holds a position of power that separates her from the blue-collar working class.

One thing that seems to be universal across the years and the soaps, however, appears to be teen sex appeal, which is transferable to older viewers as well. From the beginning, *Neighbours* had its share of men taking their clothes off, with “Henry running around the Ramsay household naked apart from a top hat clutched to his genitals; Billy persuaded to strip

naked for a life-drawing class... [and] the entire male cast going the 'Full Monty' for a diegetic charity performance in 1999" (McKee, 248). In the few *Neighbours* episodes I watched, there were several scenes at the pool with boys wearing just their swimming trunks, and Ringo Brown weightlifting without a shirt. Not catering only to the female viewers, Rachel Kinski also appears at the pool in a two-piece swimsuit, showing off her body, and Carmella Cammeniti wanders around in an oversized shirt after a night stay at Marco's home. On *ATWT*, there have been some particularly steamy scenes in the past, emphasizing this sex appeal, with heartthrobs such as Jack Snyder and Dusty Donovan shirtless in the summer heat. Just this year, Brad Snyder got drunk playing poker and lost all of his clothing, wandering around town without a stitch on. Sex appeal is one easy way to target viewers, and it seems neither show disappoints.

Croft continues by discussing the presence of unrebelling youth in *Neighbours*, characterized by the idea that "young characters uphold sensible adult values" (Crofts, 100). While for the most part the teen characters on *Neighbours* today seem to fit this mold, they do still rebel against their parents sometimes, such as when Zeke Kinski lies to all of the neighborhood parents so that the teens can sneak out to an illegal dance party, and when Rachel Kinski begins a love affair with her substitute teacher Angus Henderson. Over on *ATWT*, Casey Hughes is either in jail, lying to Margo, or arguing with her about working with Emily Stewart, and Parker Snyder was nearly convicted of murder, and then started skipping school with his new cousin Liberty. Perhaps the youth on these shows have become more rebellious to fit with current youth culture, in an attempt to remain relatable. Along with the presence of sensible adult values is the fact that, originally on *Neighbours*, sex was not often shown, and was instead "rare, loving and discreet" (Crofts, 100). This particular idea has held constant over the years with *Neighbours*, though the same can certainly not be said for *ATWT*. In the month's worth of

episodes of *Neighbours* that I watched, no one had sex – at least, no one had sex on screen, and sex was not explicitly referred to by anyone. Sure, affairs were referred to, and Carmella is quite pregnant for someone not married (or even dating anyone), indicating that sex does happen, but it is less explicit. This may or may not be typical of the entire history of the show, but speaks to the respect that relationships and privacy are treated with. On *ATWT*, on the other hand, sex is referred to and depicted every week, sometimes several times. From the explicit tumbles in the sheets of Henry and Vienna and Brad and Katie, to Paul and Sophie interrupted on his couch, to the recent image of Alison in her lingerie with Chris, *ATWT* does not shy away from showing sexual images and suggesting their role in relationships.

When it comes to ‘feelgood’ characters and wholesome neighborliness, *Neighbours* has not strayed from its original purpose. In addition to the generally cheerful nature of the cast of *Neighbours*, Harold and Lou, who run the General Store, seem to be there just to provide some good-natured relief and act as grandfather figures. When Susan Kinski came home from the hospital after burning her hands and being diagnosed with MS, all of the neighbors joined together to have a barbeque to welcome her home. The sense of neighborliness is so strong that the idea of a serial killer being introduced to Ramsay Street, as has occurred on other soap operas including *ATWT*, is so “radically excessive” that it couldn’t possible happen (Ang, 132). Less neighborly, *ATWT* still has some feel good characters, though they are by no means without fault. Tom Hughes is one such supporting character who seems to always be on the side of good, while Luke Snyder is often seen as the supportive son and brother. While nearly every character on the show seems to be related somehow, friendly offers of help are often met with suspicion.

Consistent with maintaining the ‘feelgood’ and wholesome atmosphere on *Neighbours*, differences, disagreements and disputes between characters are resolved, dissolved, or repressed

rather quickly. This still holds true today; rather than maintaining lengthy feuds, such as the one between Paul Ryan and Chris Hughes on *ATWT*, characters on *Neighbours* put aside their differences. When Kirsten returns to town, trying to seduce Ned Parker away from his girlfriend Janae, Janae still tries to be friendly and even invites Kirsten to spend Christmas Day with them, because she knows how happy it will make Ned and Kirsten's son, Mickey. And rather than allowing Kirsten to blackmail her over a mistaken kiss with Darren, Janae doesn't drag the situation out, telling Ned herself after just a few days to resolve the tension in their relationship.

In this line, Croft explains that "the program blurs or represses differences of gender politics, sexual preference, age, and ethnicity," adding to idea of the depoliticized middle class citizenship (Crofts, 101). While it may have been easy to blur these lines in the early 1990s, some of these issues are brought up in 2008, though they are resolved rapidly. When Valda Sheergold begins to have money troubles because of a lingerie scheme gone bad, she nearly commits insurance fraud before her granddaughter Stephanie Scully (and her fiancé Toadie) bail her out, solving all her troubles and giving her a job at Charlie's, the local bar and restaurant. Age is brought up on *Neighbours* with an interesting storyline involving 16 year old Rachel Kinski as she starts to date Angus, before realizing that he is, in fact, her new teacher. The storyline brings up several issues about what is acceptable in the community and what age gaps are too large for a relationship to be proper. While the two had only begun to sneak around and pursue their relationship in the episodes that I watched, reading several websites with spoiler information reveals that their relationship eventually becomes public knowledge, and Angus is forced to break things off. Whether this is the end of Rachel and Angus and the age dilemma, however, is yet to be seen, but the neighborhood disapproval of the age difference is made quite clear by the fact that Angus is currently in prison. *ATWT* is no stranger to bringing differences

into the forefront of the story. Through the character of Luke Snyder, the question of sexual preference is examined, first through his coming out, and currently through his homosexual relationship with Noah Mayer – hated and cherished in turn by different fans. And just this past week in early May, the issue of age was brought up as Casey seduced Emily, a woman who not only had an affair with his father but is also the mother of his half-brother. I wait in anticipation to see where this storyline goes and the scandals it causes.

Regarding the shows' writing, *ATWT* has long been ridiculed for having terrible writers. *Neighbours* was praised for its simple but interesting writing, consisting of lots of short storylines. It was considered quite the feat to make stories about average, everyday life still seem interesting. Watching a month's worth of episodes of *Neighbours*, I was exposed to a variety of stories of varying lengths, many of which I found very intriguing. And, unlike most storylines on *ATWT*, they were brief enough to continue to capture the interest of the audience for several episodes, without being drawn out over several weeks. A big, sensational storyline on *Neighbours*, filled with cliffhangers and suspense, involved most of the teens in Erinsborough, as well as a few of the adults, trapped in a warehouse collapse after an illegal dance party. There were less than 10 episodes spanning the initial collapse through the rescue efforts, families waiting outside for news, and safe recovery of almost all inside. This quick resolution allowed the story to captivate audience attention without taking too much away from the other storylines. A similar teen-centric suspenseful storyline on *ATWT*, when a "slasher" serial killer came to town, was drawn out over numerous episodes in 2006. Clips of the relevant portions from each episode, archived on Youtube, span more than 20 episodes alone for the portion of the story taking place on the camping trip, culminating in the revelation of the culprit's identity. The storyline itself, with earlier attacks and the connection to Maddie's rape, reach back to even more

episodes, prolonging the storyline. The short length of the storylines in *Neighbours* allows for the audience to remain captivated and interested in everything that is happening, instead of getting bored from too much attention being placed on one large event for an extended period of time.

Overall, the current episodes of *Neighbours* have been shown to be consistent with many of the aspects that were found to be the cause of its original success, while *ATWT* demonstrates many differences. By depicting average family occurrences in a fun, healthy and wholesome atmosphere, *Neighbours* has retained its original premise while remaining relevant and entertaining in today's market in Australia and the UK. The comparisons to *ATWT* reveal some inherent differences with American soap operas, dominated by the added melodrama, explicit sexual references, and abundance of lengthy storylines and grudges held. These distinct features, which tend to add a "thrill" and vicarious nature to American soap operas, explain why the more optimistic and family-friendly *Neighbours* was unsuccessful in the US market<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> This is by no means the only reason behind *Neighbours*' failure in the US, which was also affected by competition, scheduling issues, and relevance. However, I feel it remains a predominant factor.

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