

FRIENDS OF THE ABC (Tasmania)

Submission to the Senate Environment and Communications Reference Committee considering

ABC commitment to reflecting and representing regional diversity in Australia

This submission will focus on

- The impact of closure of the Tasmanian ABC Film Production Unit on this state's local community
- The lack of commitment by ABC Management to extend and develop its own staff to produce more Australian content.
- The lack of transparency in ABC budgeting and reporting on its vision for Australian television programming that complies with its Charter obligations and reflects national identity

IMPACT OF CLOSURE OF THE TASMANIAN ABC FILM UNIT

Tasmanians value their local ABC for the services, entertainment, education and cultural enrichment it provides. The ABC is a vital part of our community.

Any Tasmanian listening to ABC radio during the recent bushfire disaster would have been highly impressed with the standard of local ABC broadcasters who combined the announcement of vital information with empathy and reassurance. During this very stressful period for Tasmania we have seen so many heroes emerge to act well above and beyond their immediate responsibility. Across the state local people rallied to help each other. But the calm voice of ABC radio also deserves recognition and special acknowledgement. Equally the graphic news footage from local ABC television news crews reflects the importance of the national broadcaster in reporting major events around Australia

ABC Radio participates in many local events and its annual ABC "Giving Tree" Christmas appeal is a wonderful example of just how Tasmanians respond to "their ABC"

As part of the ABC's recent 80th Anniversary celebration a Tasmanian Exhibition highlighted the diverse role the ABC has played in this community and the exhibits reflected the strength and value of localism.

Local ABC Television has a proud record of presenting news, sport and current affairs, Gardening Australia, The Collectors and Auction Room as well as working in partnership with Screen Tasmania

Unfortunately the number of local TV production hours required by ABC Management has been in decline since the former Head of ABC Television, Kim Dalton introduced a more centralised policy to reduce ABC production and outsource to independent film makers.

Tasmanian staff have offered ideas for new programming to utilise their broad experience and local resources but Sydney based programmers have not responded to ensure maintenance of programming from the island state.

At a recent FABC (Tasmania) seminar with local staff and other interested people a variety of program ideas were developed including the potential for factuals that reflected the history and environment of Tasmania as well as local documentaries and lifestyle programs.

The failure of the ABC to recognise the potential in localised film production shows a cultural arrogance towards Tasmania which as a state has more local writers and publications per capita than either Sydney or Melbourne!!.

Furthermore the closure of the Tasmanian Film Production Unit will result in

- a loss of ABC jobs in directing, editorial, camera, sound ,archives and support functions
- young film makers will lose career paths and mentors
- the Tasmanian screen industry will lose key professionals and opportunities to work in partnership with the ABC .
- Local film makers will be obliged to leave the State
- There will be no capacity for creative screen industries to take advantage of the National Broadband Network

At the same time as announcing the closure of the Tasmanian ABC Film Unit, Mark Scott attempted to salve his conscience by offering the Tasmanian Premier a small financial incentive to encourage partnership with independent local film makers. However it would be impossible for Tasmanian ABC to manage such a partnership if its professional staff and resources have been removed from the state.

LACK OF COMMITMENT BY ABC MANAGEMENT TO EXTEND AND DEVELOP ITS OWN STAFF TO PRODUCE MORE AUSTRALIAN CONTENT

When it comes to entertainment and education programming, ABC Television seriously limits its capacity to project the Australian perspective. While there are four ABC channels there is extremely limited opportunity for regional stories to be told by publicly funded ABC. Television.

It is true that some excellent Australian feature films are screened on ABC 1 and a number of these are repeated on ABC 2. Children and teenagers are well catered for through ABC 3 though there could be more Australian content. NEWS 24 keeps us up to date with current affairs and is increasingly incorporating more regional content. There are opportunities through OPEN ABC for community development of some local content but this cannot be compared with professional television production for national and international screening.

The announcement by Mark Scott in November 2012 that Tasmania's local TV production unit would be closed is most disturbing because it demonstrates the ABC has no commitment to localism. It follows closure of film units in several states, where the ABC is outsourcing production of its local content.

There is no problem with the ABC working in partnership with the independent film industry, but the ABC itself has a specific responsibility to be a leader in the planning of such a cooperative venture. It is the national broadcaster yet the decision to outsource film production to major film makers based on the mainland will guarantee that our Australian content will be largely confined to mainland urban perspectives. ABC staff themselves are offered only limited creative opportunities to develop documentaries, factuals and a range of programming that reflects Australian culture and lifestyle.

The ABC screens far too many hours of BBC repeats and programs that could so easily be produced to project Australian identity.

For example modern Australian cuisine is recognised internationally, yet the ABC relies on Nigella and Jamie.

Similarly British documentaries predominate so that Australians must view travel and lifestyle programs through the eyes of aging British chaps!!

Apparently the ABC has a special Output Deal with the BBC which was renewed on February 24 2012 for a further three years and gives Australia special access to these programs

Call the Midwife
Death in Paradise
Great Expectations
Fry's Planet Word
Alone in the Wild

It is not known what sum was paid for this special arrangement but one presumes the cost was substantial yet this allocation has not yet been reported to the Australian public. By contrast the BBC is more upfront about its business dealings and in its 2011-12 Annual Report BBC World Wide International boasts that it

“exists to generate investment for BBC programs and services through commercial exploitation of BBC assets”

Clearly the ABC is a good friend to the BBC because the same report identifies an 8.9% growth market in Australia valued at 140 million British pounds That amount begins to approximate nearly one fifth of the ABC's total Annual Budget. Just imagine how even a fraction of that amount could increase Australian content!

Current ABC Management fails to comprehend the importance of regionalism in planning its weekly national television program.

It is left to the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) and its new channel National Indigenous Television (NITV) to screen stories about Australians living in so many different regions of the country.

The commercial channels are required to incorporate a quota of Australian content but the ABC allows the BBC to still dominate our screens so that night after night we are offered endless British repeats and lifestyle programs made on the other side of the world with limited relevance to Australian audiences.

Obviously many Australian appreciate the screening of BBC drama and would expect the ABC to invest in this as well as content from other parts of the world.

But ABC staff should be working with the next generation of young film makers to make our own history, science, travel, cooking, cultural and lifestyle programs. How can regional stories be developed into film scripts and produced by local actors if the ABC refuses to accept its responsibility to project the Australian identity? Why does the ABC pay the BBC for films that could be made locally?

The ABC demonstrates strong commitment to the Charter through ABC Radio but how well does ABC Television perform in meeting these obligations?

ABC TELEVISION BUDGET AND FORWARD PLANNING TRANSPARENCY

Increasingly Australian viewers are questioning the way the ABC plans and prioritises its budget because when it comes to ABC television they are not convinced we are receiving value for taxpayer investment. in the national broadcaster

At the same time that Mark Scott is closing down regional television production, senior staff salaries remain top secret and there is limited information about the ABC's Budget.

Two years ago the Herald and Weekly Times sought access through Freedom of Information to official documents "dealing with salaries and payments to program-makers on 13 programs for the financial year ending 2010" Releasing this public information has been strenuously resisted by ABC Management, no doubt citing commercial in confidence as justifying their arrogance.

Yet the ABC is a PUBLIC institution and it must be fully transparent about how it is spending taxpayer funded resources.

The Administrative Appeals Tribunal has overseen the two appeals by the ABC, both of which have been lost because the Tribunal upholds the principle of public accountability and reminds the ABC that it is not exempt from the operation of the FOI Act.

In examining the ABC Annual Report it is impossible to locate specific information about how the ABC allocates its resources to produce Australian content. There seems to be no publicly available data on specific allocations for Australian drama, documentaries and other lifestyle programs. And there is certainly no detail about the extent to which the Australian taxpayer is subsidising the BBC through special program deals and sale of BBC content from ABC Bookshops

It is unclear just how the ABC plans its television program and how it decides on selected material. There is just anecdotal reporting that some independent film makers are encouraged while others are overlooked. Some with an ABC or BBC background may be favoured and given free range to produce longer series than the content warrants. Meanwhile some popular programs may not be extended nor even repeated. How well is the ABC's own professional staff consulted and brought into the process of selection and forward planning?

Clearly any viewer or visitor to an ABC Bookshop must query just what the relationship between the ABC and the BBC is and how this is affecting the making, screening and marketing of Australian content.

It is not generally known and certainly not publicised in Australia that there is a formal agreement between the ABC and BBC.

The clear preference for BBC content appears to be constraining the ABC's production of local content and in the process dismantling the wealth of expertise built up by professional staff over eight decades

The ABC had an excellent Natural History Unit which was abolished several years ago and now state based television production is next in line

If current trends continue there will be no ABC staff employed in Australian television production unless they take their chances within the independent film industry

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. That this Senate Inquiry request the following material from ABC Management

a. Details of funding in making Australian content television programs (excluding news and current affairs) on an annual basis for the past five years

These figures to include a breakdown of Australian content made

- Internally
- Externally
- Partnership

b. Details and cost of the ABC/BBC Output Deal signed on 24th February 2012 committing ABC Television for three years. Is this a reciprocal agreement that includes the screening and sale of Australian content in Britain?

c. Details of the total cost of all BBC programming and the ratio of ABC/BBC stock at all ABC Bookshops, including details of cost recovery

2. The Senate Committee invite ABC Management to make available any material which projects future ABC television programming that balances partnership between ABC staff and independent film makers in all regions of Australia. Furthermore there could be a great deal more focus by the national broadcaster on projecting Australian culture to our immediate neighbours in the Asia Pacific Region.

Prepared by

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She was a Member of the North Queensland ABC Advisory Committee in the 1980s

During her term as Chair of Screen Tasmania (2000-2010) a number of local productions were commissioned by the ABC and the Tasmanian Department of Economic Development invested in the establishment of the Goodwood Studios where the popular ABC series The Collectors was produced.

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