

News+Views

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Powerful enemies

Global war on public broadcasting

Australia's commercial media is using the downsizing of the BBC as an opportunity to attack the ABC.

Last year, Rupert Murdoch's son James attacked the BBC because the smaller the BBC becomes, the more money News Corporation can make. (*News+Views*, Spring 2009) In Australia, major media companies have made it known they want the ABC curtailed. Sky News (Murdoch, and the Seven and Nine networks) even wants to get its hands on public funds, and has called for all new government services, such as television channels for children and education, to be put out to tender.

Now, the BBC has announced it will cut its activities so that it is less of a competitor to its commercial rivals. Such action is widely considered to be pre-emptive, intended to avoid an impending Conservative government inflicting greater damage.

Australia's commercial media is using the downsizing of the BBC as an opportunity to attack the ABC. Reports and discussion in their media outlets falsely imply the ABC is awash with funds. The fact that the BBC's funding bears little resemblance to that of Australia's resource-starved public broadcaster, even on a per capita basis, has been swept aside. So has the huge difference in the extent of their activities and the BBC's incomparable prominence in its local media landscape.

The Murdoch dynasty's media outlets have waged war against the ABC since the time it was conceived. Recently, Mark Day, a senior columnist with *The Australian* wrote: "It is time we had a full debate about the role of the ABC. It was established in a vastly different media landscape as a taxpayer-funded entity designed to, in part, fill in the market niches not served by the commercial sector. Now, thanks to pay-TV and the digital revolution, those niches are hotly contested".

Fairfax, the only other major print media owner in Australia, now also has an interest in the ABC becoming a less than vibrant public broadcaster – the result of Fairfax's expansion from print into radio (3AW and 2UE) and its desire to supplement declining newspaper sales with online audiences.



rivertomypeople.com

In March, Fairfax's *The Age* newspaper published a major article on the ABC. Spread across three pages, its 'Insight' article contained a half-page cartoon of ABC managing director Mark Scott dressed as Napoleon. Its second-level heading asked if huge plans for the ABC would "further weaken other media – and ultimately endanger our democracy".

Comment for the article was not sought from Friends of the ABC, the major organisation representing the community's interest in its national public broadcaster. Nor did *The Age* publish FABC's letter-to-the-editor, or a single other letter on this major article.

The mass media still overwhelmingly determines what information will be revealed to or concealed from the community on important matters like the state of the public broadcaster. And, together with Australia's dangerously high concentration of media ownership, the capacity of the media to sway voters has resulted in a small number of commercial media owners being powerful enough to influence – indeed, to dictate terms to – elected governments.

It is not difficult to foresee what the ABC's future will be without a strong defender. NOW is the time to recruit to Friends of the ABC!

FABC's letter that *The Age* did not publish is on page 4.

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What's happened to investigative journalism?

Chris Masters worked for the ABC for forty years and became the pre-eminent investigative reporter. After Chris retired last year, he gave a stimulating address on investigative journalism to Friends of the ABC members and the public.

When I was at the ABC I did have an awareness that the strength of my old workplace was often hard to see. In the core of the place is a collective energy and conscience that has immeasurable value to the nation. When people walk through the door at *Four Corners* they become part of an established identity and automatically assume a responsibility to maintain a standard, working very hard and very determinedly in the national interest.

The ABC can't claim audience numbers but it can claim appreciation. And at *Four Corners* I came to see that the essence of the place was not measured by the smile and personality of any individual but in its beating heart.

You can see it in the very choice of a story. Do we select a story that tells itself and advances our own currency or do we choose a story that might cost us a little pain along the way but benefits the public in the long run?

And if you take on the difficult stories – who has got your back? It is very much a team effort, researching, checking, going through a maze of information. And when you do pull it together where do you find the lawyers who will defend you for daring to challenge the powerful?

When you get out you can see why this kind of journalism occurs infrequently – and why a program like *Four Corners* is so constantly quoted. *Four Corners* actually undertakes original research – and it actually confronts difficult subjects.

Why is there not more? It is not because reporters are lazy, irresponsible and self-indulgent. Most reporters wherever they work in my view put public interest ahead of personal motive. But the news industry is about being first and fast – not thorough and accurate. While at *Four Corners* we had months to complete our work – most reporters have only hours.

The practical reality of the job is not trying to get to the bottom of a story – there is nowhere near the time, but rather collecting quotes – and that alone is hard work. And who sets the agenda? Another practical reality is news is easily manipulated. Television reporting can often seem more like event management – where unseen 'editors' in media departments orchestrate events and a mass of news crews assemble to cover the same story.

The main structural problem is for me a disincentive to research. And it is not just a matter of lack of time. Journalists tend to be paid the same whether they do a lot of research or no research. And if you do a lot

of research profit shrinks accordingly. So the game for the news industry is to get away with doing the least amount of research possible.

And as anyone with a computer can see it is killing itself. We are living in interesting times – in the middle of an information revolution. Not since the invention of the printing press has the world of information communication changed so dramatically.

The traditional role of news editor as gatekeeper has gone. And those immeasurable skills that develop in news rooms and at places like *Four Corners* – what matters, where can we find out, how do we form the

narrative, how do we make a difference – are quietly dissipating.

The news industry is dying on its feet as revenue is eroded. The public is turning to the Internet for news and it is hard to find a way to stop them taking it for free. Traditional media too exploits the Internet – but in the main to reprocess existing news.

Why does this important industry allow itself to be defeated? Why can't we take advantage of the immense potential of the Internet to improve primary research? When I made *The Moonlight State* in 1987, which triggered the Fitzgerald Inquiry, searching company records and getting information from the titles office took weeks. Now with the World Wide Web it could be done in minutes.

But when I look around I see few reporters taking advantage of the opportunities. It can partly be because there are some costs involved – but it is mostly because primary research is factored out of mainstream journalism – again because of a perceived cost. My argument is that we must find a way to pay those costs. Investigative journalism should not be seen as the tip of the spear but the spear itself. All journalism should be investigative.

Research is the key. In the last decades within the news industry there has been a great deal of concern about the rise of commentary displacing conventional news reporting. Sometimes it is difficult to see a distinction in an article between commentary and reporting. I don't see this as a result of public demand but more because it is cheap. It is easier to allow a shock jock to do your thinking for you. It is easier for a reporter to belt off 700 words without conducting a single interview. It is

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Chris Masters speaks to friends

cheaper for a network to hire a bombastic commentator, give him a studio and call it current affairs. It is not brave opinion. It is cheap.

Opinion without fact is next to useless. The problem is not opinion per se but an absence of research. I have a suggestion. For the sake of public health perhaps we should require columnists to identify their research with small telephone icons beside a column to identify how many calls were made.

I do not worry about the motivation and ability of young reporters to get out of the office and chase a story. I worry about a lack of encouragement to do so. I worry about the Internet becoming a passive tool of seduction rather than an active tool of discovery.

Most of what I know was learned because I had the good luck to win a job with the national broadcaster back in 1966. The Masters apprenticeship was rich and rewarding although I did not know this at the time. Riches and rewards are words not usually associated with public service.

Working in a range of ABC regional stations exposed me to the best training an investigative journalist can have. The ABC taught me to look everywhere, and when I came upon that story that was more in the

realm of the need to know rather than the want to know, I was encouraged and supported. When I confronted complicated and abstract subjects it would have been easier to walk past them to the more appealing subjects, but the ABC told me to have a go. I was taught narrative skills that helped make meaning of complex information. I learned how to make the important interesting rather than the other way around.

I worked through an era where rarely was the ABC popular with government. I winced as administration after administration hacked at my workplace. A first casualty was often research. I had never made a program on my own. The best of them were always the result of a concentration of talent and research. While

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by general standards *Four Corners* remains well resourced by the time I left I frequently found no research assistance was available.

The trend should not just be stopped. It should be reversed. While *Four Corners* continues to do well the ABC can do more to infuse research into journalism. Throughout the industry *ABC News* is not highly regarded as a news breaker. In the electronic media when resources are distributed there is always the danger that more effort will be applied to production than to content. There are TV reporters who not only survive, but prosper in a career which has barely seen them pick up the phone.

I say again, I am not an enemy of opinion – but rather empty headed opinion. If the journalism we know and respect is to survive we have to do better. And the ABC is I am



Friends of the ABC Vic's 2009 AGM

sure smart enough to know there is no comfort in a weakening of competition. Australia is well served by the contest of public and commercial media with both sides the lesser if one is to fail.

I trust that the ABC's pioneering drive into new media will not be at the expense of features of old media that have served the nation well – and secured the reputation of

the ABC as a treasured institution. It is a good time for the ABC and as I am sure Mark Scott knows, not a time for complacency.

This is an edited version of Chris Master's address at the Friends of the ABC Vic's 2009 AGM. A full version can be viewed at www.fabc.org.au

ABC Chairman endangers ABC independence

Newman on thin ice

ABC Chairman Maurice Newman is entitled to his personal views. But the recent public expression of his scepticism on climate change was inappropriate for the head of the country's foremost independent media organisation.

His strongly implied criticism of the ABC's coverage on climate change looks to be an attempt to influence the ABC's editorial content.

It is difficult not to consider Mr Newman's comments, which have damaged public trust in the integrity and independence of the public broadcaster, in the light of his well-known conservative associations. Together they highlight the importance of legislation presently before the Parliament for a new transparent and merit-based process for appointing the chair and other members of the ABC Board.



Cartoon by Nicholson www.nicholsoncartoons.com.au. First published *The Australian*.

The ABC is the solution, not the threat to democracy

A robust ABC is not a threat to our democracy. ('The ABC's brave new world', *Age Insight*, March 13) The real danger would be if the national public broadcaster is not resourced to remain relevant and a major player in Australia's media landscape.

The failure of the business model that supported quality journalism highlights the need for a strong public broadcaster. The power that Australia's concentration in media ownership affords to unelected media owners makes a strong and independent ABC imperative.

A diminished ABC would serve the interests of the proprietors of commercial media, not those of Australia or its citizens. Diversity of views, truly independent analysis and the maintenance of our local culture will be at serious risk if the ABC is curtailed or not funded to thrive.



Four Corners journalist Liz Jackson on the job in East Timor

Julie Copeland

Copeland Retires

Julie Copeland, an admired long-time ABC broadcaster, has retired. The thoughts and reminiscences of two of Julie's colleagues on the program-maker who started *The Europeans* and made a significant contribution to many other innovative Radio National programs over almost three decades can be read at www.fabc.org.au



Australia needs investigative journalists

ABC Managing Director Mark Scott is promoting his vision of the public broadcaster as a virtual "town square". With the ABC Open project to be launched in 2010, Scott plans to transform the ABC into a hub of user-generated content with digital media producers stationed around Australia to teach people how to upload their content to the ABC's website.

A good public broadcaster should keep on top of new media developments and the ABC has done well. But how will that contribute to the production of quality journalism?

ABC news rooms do a great job of providing fair and balanced daily news. But what of investigative journalism, which involves testing the claims made by authorities, and digging to expose things that those in power would prefer remained hidden.

Cordell's study of ABC TV's flagship investigative program *Four Corners* revealed that only 15 of the 30 stories she analysed met all the criteria of investigative journalism.

Is the ABC using its scarce resources wisely? Should it instead direct them to the provision of good professional journalism at a time when media commentators warn of the decline of newspapers and the consequent paucity of quality or investigative journalism?

If the ABC invested in 50 investigative journalists, instead of 50 digital media producers, would it make a greater contribution to high quality journalism at this critical time?

Adapted from *The Future of Journalism needs Journalists* by Marnie Cordell in *New Matilda* 12 Nov 2009. www.newmatilda.com

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24-Hour ABC TV news channel

Friends supports the ABC's decision to establish a 24-hour television news channel. News is a key responsibility of the national broadcaster and is specified in the ABC Act. The ABC already has the infrastructure. Importantly, it can be relied upon for its independence.

The broadcaster is already seriously underfunded to deliver in-depth news and current affairs. The new channel will place extra strain on the quality of ABC content.

Nevertheless, the ABC has to move forward to remain relevant. Sky News has introduced a 24-hour news channel in an effort to usurp the ABC as the country's pre-eminent news provider, and work and life changes have resulted in the community now needing to access the news at different times.

The ABC needs to be well-funded to seek and analyse the news. Our democracy

depends on it being resourced to break through the propaganda that merchants of spin for governments and corporations now bombard news rooms with daily.

The Rudd Labor Government's first budget to address ABC funding provided funds for two new initiatives – the ABC Open regional hubs and ABC3 children's television. Beyond increased funding for drama, there was no increase to address the decline in other ABC services over many years.

It is imperative that ABC funding be increased. The national broadcaster must be able to deliver quality news and current affairs on radio, television and online. Additional spectrum must be allocated to the ABC so that Australians without high definition TV will be able to access the ABC's new news channel too.