



9 September, 2011

Senate Inquiry into recent ABC programming decisions.

Submission from Perth International Arts Festival

ABC Arts Funding Cuts

Why do we have an ABC anyway?

Each year the ABC supports the work we do at the Perth International Arts Festival, where our mission is to stimulate our culture and inspire our community by conducting a contemporary annual arts festival of the highest international quality.

The ABC receives government funding to provide a broadcasting service – television, radio, internet. The only way it can legitimately justify its call on the public purse is by claiming that it provides a service that otherwise would not be provided by commercial entities.

But at the moment the ABC seems to have embarked on a course of justifying its public funding by trying to attract increased ratings and growing viewer numbers but in doing so risks undermining its charter and the very reasons it is given public funding in the first place that is, to do the things the others can not or will not do.

There is no justification whatsoever in claiming government money to provide a service that either is or could be properly provided by commercial television, radio or internet services. If it moves its focus more and more into areas of mass appeal, already adequately covered by commercial broadcasters, it totally undermines its claim on the public purse. The government – and taxpayers – have a legitimate case to ask why they have to pay for a service that could and is being provided by others.

That is not to say the ABC can justify broadcasting programs with no viewer appeal at all. Part of the ABC's charter is to find the balance between material of mass appeal and broader community "value". But it must never lose sight of its core values.

The ABC, in particular Radio National and Art Nation, helps the Perth Festival bring art to as wide an audience as possible. The talented journalists there work hard to find the stories the commercial media miss, spending time speaking with artists and acting as a conduit between the art and the public. Performances in the Festival are only part of the picture – the stories behind the shows and the conversation about audience experience complete this picture. In terms of commercial value, perhaps a photo story of the biggest stars in the Festival published in the highest circulating newspapers can boost ticket sales but when it comes to adding value to the artists' work by showing it in greater depth and helping connect it to the public, there has been no greater supporter than the ABC. Indeed the majority of coverage of the Perth Festival in radio and television comes from the ABC, and we are sure this is the case for the entire arts sector in Australia. Without the ABC arts unit the arts sector in Western Australia would be erased from the national conversation and this is simply unacceptable.

The ABC's charter specifically refers to an obligation to "broadcast programs that contribute to a sense of national identity and inform and entertain, and reflect the cultural diversity of, the Australian

community". It is also obliged to broadcast programs of an "educational nature" and to "encourage and promote the musical, dramatic and other performing arts in Australia".

Anecdotally, the ABC will also tell you that it has a claim to public patronage by providing "quality" broadcasting unfettered by the demands of advertisers, sponsors or the biases of media owners. It is in a unique position to promote the broader social aims deemed "good" for a community – aims such as reflecting ethnic diversity, indigenous voices, regional access, political fairness... and promoting art and culture .

If the ABC moves away from these core values as outlined in the charter, it is impossible to justify its existence.

It has already come perilously close to abandoning key parts of the charter. In closing the radio education department some years ago, it jeopardised its raison d'être. For many years now, there has been very limited national radio production out of Perth. Recently we have seen the total abandonment of television production by the ABC in Perth. It may be easier and cheaper to make TV and radio out of Sydney and Melbourne, or to buy TV programs from other countries, but this approach in no way reflects the "cultural diversity of the Australian community".

And most recently, by abandoning TV arts and, it seems, completely downgrading the approach to arts on Radio National, the ABC looks likely to be jettisoning another key tenant of its charter.

As the authors of the charter well knew, the arts, which by their very nature, do not have mass appeal and will not be picked up and promoted by commercial broadcasters, are an integral part of the Australian community, playing a massive, but often intangible (in terms of dollars, anyway) role in promoting communities, bringing people together, inspiring learning and achievement and firing imaginations.

In spite of claims of elitism from some, the fact remains that promoting "the arts" is central to the ABC's very existence. Indeed arguments about the nature and appeal of that art should be part of the public discussion about art – and rightly conducted on the national broadcaster.

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