

9 September 2011

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
ec.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Sir/Madam

Re: Inquiry into recent ABC programming decisions

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to this Inquiry. The Australian Publishers Association (APA) is the peak industry body representing publishers and distributors of books, journals and educational materials in print and electronic form. The APA has over 200 members representing more than 90% of the industry, based on turnover.

The value of Australia's intellectual property is enormous. Australia's knowledge industries — which include both the ABC and book publishers — generate approximately the same annual income as the mining sector but rarely get the same headlines. Australia needs to give as much thought to policies that strengthen our knowledge industries as we do to policies that favour mining.

Unshackled from the tyranny of distance by the emerging digital economy, we now have a golden opportunity to show that Australia can compete and prosper in the global knowledge industry. But to do this, the Government and its agencies, like the ABC, must demonstrate a commitment to helping the nation's knowledge industries reach their full potential.

We were heartened by the Prime Minister's speech to CEDA in February of this year, where she said that:

We are the lucky country, but we are so much more than that ... I am determined to drive a permanent reshaping of our economy so that our success far outlasts our luck ... A high tech, high skill, clean energy economy that is self-sustaining beyond our reliance on mineral exports. That's a future I want our children and grandchildren to thrive in.

We believe that Australia's content industries are well-placed to help deliver a major part of the Prime Minister's vision.

However, it is clear that Australian content industries need Government support. As one of the major sources of Australian-specific content, Australian publishers agreed with the Government's statement in the Preamble to the Terms of Reference of its current Convergence Review that, 'Regulatory settings are necessary to foster competition, to encourage diversity, and to protect Australian stories.'

But before we can adequately 'protect' our stories they need to be created, developed and disseminated. In the flood of digitised data about to wash over us, unless Australians are encouraged to create more home-grown culture we will have little to protect and no incentive to do so. With radically improved global access to content, the future could be one where

Australian culture struggles to compete with the dumped and discounted programs of major overseas cultural producers who see Australia as a lucrative second or third market for their product that is often outdated and culturally irrelevant..

In the free-to-air TV arena, the current content regulations ensure that an agreed proportion of Australian material is broadcast. However, in the increasingly important and proliferating digital TV sector no such content regulations apply (mainly because our negotiators were easily railroaded by America's negotiators during the lead up to the AUSFTA). The result is, as Kim Dalton commented recently at a conference in Sydney, 'market failure' — that is, virtually no Australian content at all on these new digital channels. Why? Because, in the absence of regulatory pressure or inducements, broadcasters will plump for the cheapest option — and that is usually created overseas.

The APA understands that recent programming decisions at the ABC have resulted in the imminent axing of a number of arts related programs. ABC management have responded to the outrage created by these decisions by saying that they were merely attempts to re-arrange internal funding structures and to find more flexible ways of producing Australian content. ABC management maintain that the eventual outcome of their decisions will be more (and better?) Australian content.

The APA is concerned that these promises are currently unsupported by firmer, more specific commitments. The ABC has, for years, shouldered the burden of presenting Australian culture to a far greater extent than its commercial competitors.. We are therefore fearful that the latest programming decisions will be used by management to bolster other agendas and that their promises of more and better arts and culture programming in the future will be soon forgotten.

We recommend that:

- 1. the ABC be asked to specify in more detail how its current programming decisions will benefit the presentation of Australian arts and culture content in the near future;**
- 2. the ABC Charter be amended so that it is required to 'encourage and promote' the 'literary, visual, media, craft and design arts in Australia' as well as the 'musical, dramatic and other performing arts' (as it currently does);**
- 3. the ABC be adequately funded in the future to be able to produce or commission high-quality, innovative and relevant programs about Australian arts and culture.**

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you require any further input.

Yours faithfully

Maree McCaskill
Chief Executive Officer