

13 September 2011

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Dear Mr Palethorpe,

Thank you for the opportunity to make submission to the Environment and Communications References Committee inquiry into recent Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) programming decisions. This submission responds to the a) implications of this decision on the ABC's ability to create, produce and own its television content, particularly in the capital cities of Brisbane, Adelaide, Perth and Hobart as a result of ABC television to significantly cut the number and amount of ABC-produced programs, jobs and f) other related matters. Proposed changes put forward by the Managing Director (MD), Mark Scott and staff and the concerns about these changes from interest groups within the Australian community will determine the recommendations of this submission for your consideration.

The decision by ABC management to cancel a number of programs, reduce staff and the amount of internally ABC produced programs is defended by MD, Mark Scott. In both his speech to the National Press Club, and Opinion in the Age, Scott (2011) argues that it is impossible to satisfy everyone. He claims, however, that it is possible to do more within budget in a changing media landscape while engaging audiences and meeting the ABC Charter as a result of co production. As evidence of this, Scott (2011) points to a range of productions: "the Gruen Transfer and Adam Hills in Gordon Street Tonight; drama and comedies such as Paper Giants, Rake, Angry Boys and Laid; documentaries like On Trial, Leaky Boat and Recipe for Murder; children's programs such as My Place, Dance Academy and Dirt Girl World as examples of successful co production". These examples may demonstrate some benefits of co production but Scott's claims must be measured against objections put forward by audiences, staff and interest groups including who oppose the total outsourcing of drama, documentary and feature programs.

These programming decisions, according to staff and the previous staff representative to the ABC Board, Quentin Dempster (2011), result in the loss of skilled and experienced staff. The impact is a great loss of human capital responsible for drama, documentaries and current affairs. The commercial imperative for co production, to be on sold to commercial TV and DVD will inevitably shape content to appeal to mass audiences. This can be seen as being at odds with the functions of ABC Charter which determines that the Corporation has a responsibility to provide a balance between broadcasting programs of wide appeal and specialized broadcasting programs. While the ABC must, as Scott contends (2011), account for tax payer funding, there is also a role for the public broadcaster to focus on diversity and

quality, not simply ratings. In pitching to the ABC, private producers need to focus on productions that are accessible to mass audiences rather than cater to alternative markets as described in the Charter. Furthermore, Dempster (2011) maintains that it is just as cost effective to make programs in-house as shown in the Mansfield Report. Scott's own statement from the Melbourne Press Club conference, (2011) that "We aren't out to win the ratings then followed with, "More than ever, the ABC has to be audience-focused and content-driven", appear confused and contradictory.

Cuts to arts programs challenge Management's compliance with the ABC charter "to encourage and promote the musical, dramatic and other performing arts in Australia" (Australian Broadcasting Corporation Act, 1983). Serious objections to dismantling the arts unit have been raised by the arts community and in an open letter to the ABC Board (2011) from prominent figures across all sections of Australian life. Following the letter sent 3 September 2011, Reid (Australian newspaper, 2011) announced that as well as Art Nation, Artworks on Radio National was to be as axed.

Reducing skills, production and Scott's ambition for News 24 and ABC News across all platforms at all times of the day has implications for states such as Perth and Hobart. Opportunities for those seeking careers as journalists will be reduced in these states as jobs become centred in Melbourne and Sydney. Commercialisation and political conservatism are seen as features of the current ABC editorial policy. Conservatism has been identified by Professor Sowerwine (2009), by the prevalence of New Ltd journalists on Insiders over a period of four weeks 10-31 July and community concern resulting in a petition for Getup to launch a campaign that the ABC return to its charter. Manne (2011, p.33) contends that Scott intervened and introduced anti bias guidelines and structures to the Media Watch program. According to Manne (2011), the Australian reported that it was Janet Albrechsten who initiated the changes. Chairman of the ABC Board, Maurice Newman has been criticised for his interference in editorial policy, criticising the ABC coverage of Global warming.

These trends at the ABC are of great concern to the Australian community who value the ABC for its quality and independence of production over many years and its need to be free of political interference. I, therefore, recommend that the Environment and Communications References Committee investigate the recent programming decisions with a view to determining the cost effectiveness of diverting funds to the private sector against the cost of a mix of co and in house production, therefore, maintaining a skill base in production and technology.

References

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