

9th September, 2011

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications
E: ec.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Secretary,

I am responding to the opportunity to make a submission to your current inquiry into **Recent ABC programming decisions**.

In this submission, where the word "Charter" is used I refer to the Charter as described in the *Australian Broadcasting Corporation Act 1983*.

TOR (a) the implications of this decision on the ABC's ability to create, produce and own its television content, particularly in the cities of Brisbane, Adelaide, Perth and Hobart:

It is important to recognise that these "recent" decisions are part of a chain of events, and to that end I am also including a letter I wrote in my capacity (at that time) of President of Friends of the ABC in South Australia. You will note that, although that letter was written more than two years ago, it addresses one of the very same terms of reference you, as a committee, are now investigating, that of outsourcing of production. It accurately predicted the current and impending loss of production staff through retrenchment.

The response from Mark Scott, the ABC's Managing Director, included the statement "... there is no deliberate strategy to move away from internal productions". The facts prove that this is not the case – it is hardly by a process of non-deliberation that the little remaining in-house ABC production now occurs almost exclusively in just two cities, Sydney and Melbourne. To put that in simpler terms, this has not happened by accident. That east-coast centrism has implications for program content, and I invite you to examine the percentage of stories being aired on "7.30" which originate from, for example, South Australia and Tasmania: you will find that it is well below what one might expect on the basis of the percentage of the Australian population that lives in these states.

The centralisation of TV production in just two cities will ensure the loss of regional voices. As an example, this is already happening in radio, with a national program emanating from Brisbane between 11 and 12 each morning on ABC "local" radio 891.

TOR (b) the implications of this decision on Australian film and television production in general and potential impact of quality and diversity of programs:

As is now well known 'Artworks', 'The New Inventors' and 'Collectors' have all been axed (or heads are on the chopping block awaiting the axe) which does not fit with the Charter's requirement for "comprehensive" programming. We see British programs such as "Grand Designs" about designing and building homes which are not in any way appropriate for the hot summers of Australia or the humidity of northern Australia. Imagine if the talent that is being eroded within ABC Television was able to be used to create a relevant Australian counterpart.

TOR (c) whether a reduction in ABC-produced programs is contrary to the aims of the National Regional Program Initiative:

The threat to no longer provide a live relay of SANFL (football) matches will have a large impact on people in regional South Australia who are not in a position to catch a bus or hop in the car in order to see such a match being played live. As such it is contrary to the Regional Program Initiative [*see also my response to TOR (f)*]

TOR (d) the implications of these cuts on content ownership and intellectual property

ABC television in South Australia has been responsible for the creation of innovative and quality programming such as “The Cook and the Chef”, “George Negus Tonight” and “Talking Heads”. This programming is available for the ABC to use repeatedly should the need be there, to sell to other broadcasters both here and overseas and with spinoffs such as the sale of books, CDs, DVDs and other program paraphernalia. Outsourcing will remove those rights, and while there might be a short-term saving, in the longer term money need will need to be outlaid each time the outsourced programs are repeated (if at all) and there will not be the opportunity to merchandise wares such as happened in the past with ‘Bananas in Pyjamas’ .

TOR (f) the future potential implications of these cuts on ABC Television’s capacity to broadcast state league football and rugby:

The ABC Charter requires that the Corporation “provide innovative and **comprehensive** (*my emphasis*) broadcasting services” and that it observe a balance between those of wide appeal and those of a specialised nature. The Charter also describes one of the functions of the ABC as being to that of “broadcasting programs that contribute to a sense of national identity and inform and entertain” and football must surely be one of the quintessential activities that forms part of Australia’s national identity. Part of that must be the opportunity to support your local league team.

Yet here in South Australia the ABC has failed to deny that they will be cutting the coverage of the local SANFL (Australian rules) football competition. Effectively, the ABC will be defaulting from its charter in at least three respects if this should happen.

TOR (g) any other related matters:

There is a strong argument that these “recent” decisions are part of a pattern over a period of time, and The Committee should consider that the decision-makers at the ABC have become serial offenders.

The axing of ‘The Religion Report’ from Radio National in 2008 is an example of programming that does not meet the needs of its consumers, as this was a program that was listened to by a more mature audience. My own letter to the ABC at the time brought a reply that some of this religion content would now be found on-line. But many of the loyal listeners to that program are of an age where they do not have access to a computer or, if they do, tend to use it for e-mail communication and not logging onto a website on the offchance that there might be something of the same nature as ‘The Religion Report’. In my own case I listened to it in my car, and I did not turn to the ABC website as a consequence of the axing as the powers-that-be at the ABC might have anticipated.

I urge the Committee to look at what happened to Channel 4 in Britain, where programs were purchased and content degenerated to the lowest common denominator. The ABC in Australia might well find itself following the same path.

Yours sincerely

Hon Sandra Kanck
Immediate Past President
Friends of the ABC, South Australia