

I've worked at the ABC for many years. During my time here there have been many changes. Some good. Some not so good.

Recently, major changes in the way News and Current Affairs is produced, and the slashing and burning of TV Production units across the country leave me completely disillusioned with the direction in which the ABC is heading. I use to be immensely proud going to work wearing the logo of the national broadcaster on my shirt, as I believed in it's charter, it's high standard of local TV Production and it's quality News and Current Affairs coverage. Increasingly, and unfortunately I'm now embarrassed to be associated with the ABC, as quality News and Current Affairs coverage appears to have gone out the window.

Studio automation, desktop editing and increasingly younger and inexperienced News and Current Affairs journalists and presenters have meant ABC News bulletins and current affairs programs (in particular local and national versions of 730) appear cheap and nasty imitations of the once trusted and entirely credible flagships of ABC News and Current Affairs.

The reasons behind studio automation, desktop editing and young inexperienced journalists is clear. Cost-cutting. Studio automation gets rid of nearly an entire studio crew. Nice little saving there.

Desktop editing enables journalists to cut their own stories. No need (or less need) for editors. Another nice little saving.

Young, inexperienced journalists are cheaper to employ. More savings.

It seems the modern-day ABC is run by bean-counters. No thought is given to the flow on effect of cost-savings. The result is poorly produced news bulletins containing badly edited stories, fronted by a twenty-something presenter with no credibility whatsoever. How is the viewing public meant to respond to this? This is the national broadcaster we're talking about.

The reasons behind News management's desperate grab for cash is clear. News24. The creation of News24 was entirely dependent on these cost-savings. Without them, News24 would never have got off the ground. After being on air barely a year, News24 had already developed a massive budgetary black hole. The solution? Gouge other ABC departments for funds. Thus, TV Production around the country is slashed. External and 'mixed-model' production is favoured above internal production in the mistaken belief that these models will deliver the cost-savings required to compensate for News' cash-grab.

Ironically, the examples of external and 'mixed-model' productions "Who's Been Sleeping In My House?" and "Tonic" fly in the face of the "we can make this program cheaper outside of the ABC, rather than within." Why then, when these productions got into trouble (unable to meet scheduling and on-air deadlines, etc) were ABC resources enlisted to haul them out of the poo? What sort of deal or arrangement was made to facilitate this?

A 24-hour news channel is an admirable goal. But given the ABC's current level of funding, a totally unrealistic one. The large number of radio journalists fronting News24 programs gives some indication of how thinly spread funding is. If things continue the way they appear to be going, News24's operating budget will be totally made up of funds siphoned from other departments, and in so doing, ABC management is completely disregarding the ABC's charter, whether it be in relation to Culture & the Arts; Local Sport; quality Australian drama; or regionally significant programs.

The direct flow-on from cutbacks in TV Production across the nation is the loss of operating staff, whose significant years of experience and expertise will leave ABC's across the country decimated, with only the bare bones of a core operating staff remaining. The knock-on effect will be a poorer

standard of internal production (and it's debatable whether the capability will still even exist in BAPH states) as younger, inexperienced operators will generally not deliver the high quality product expected, without input and advice from the older, wiser heads. It will be, inevitably, a vicious circle. Internal TV Production is cut. This leads to staff redundancies. Which then leads to poorer quality internal production. Which then leads 'Joe Public' to ask "What's the point of the ABC if all their programs are crap?" Which then prompts people to say "Maybe the ABC should just concentrate on news..." Which is precisely what News management appear to want, the ABC a mere News station. Nothing more.

Perhaps some ABC management types need to refamiliarize themselves with the ABC Charter. Perhaps some need to be introduced to it for the first time. Being the national broadcaster, the ABC has certain responsibilities and obligations which it must meet. If News24 remaining on air jeopardizes any of the ABC's Charter responsibilities and obligations in other areas of broadcasting and production, then a major rethink of the long term viability of News24 is required. The evidence to date suggests it cannot operate to budget, and I fear unless a major investigation is undertaken into it's long term feasibility, more and more of other departments' money is going to be flushed away.

I would point out the ABC's current situation mirrors a similar one at the BBC some years ago. The BBC decided they needed a 24 hour news channel. They went into it totally underestimating the scale of the costs involved. Soon enough other departments' budgets were being cut in order to prop up the 24 hour news channel. Eventually, (and with new management in place) the BBC made the smart decision to scale back it's 24 hour news channel and reinstate the levels of funding for other departments, notably TV drama. Given the BBC's experience, one would have thought ABC management would have gone down the News24 road with it's eyes wide open. Apparently not.

In closing, I would like to raise a matter which the ABC for as long as I can remember, is constantly criticised for. It's staffing structure. That is, top-heavy management, compared to relative numbers of operational staff.

When I began working at the ABC, the Resources Management Team here consisted of 2 people. One Resources Manager, and one Administrative Assistant. Now we have 8 people. One Resources Manager; one Staff and Client Relations Manager; one Facilities and Resources Manager; one OB and Studio Manager; one Business Planning Officer; one Facilities Co-Ordinator; one Assistant Facilities Co-Ordinator; and one recently appointed Edit Supervisor.

As I stated earlier, in my time I have seen many changes. I have seen News state they no longer require sound recordists for News or locally produced Current Affairs and insist on Single Person Crews (SPC). I have seen News insist on Studio Automation and journalists editing at their desktop. And more recently I've seen my local TV Production unit slashed to 2 staff – one Producer and one Production Manager.

All of these changes has resulted in there being significantly fewer staff for my Management Team to manage. Yet it takes 4 times the number of managers to manage this far smaller group. It often takes a stat like that to bring things into focus. Perhaps with more management comes more dismay and disappointment at bad management decisions. Perhaps it's all relative. I guess if management was doing a good job, we wouldn't be questioning their numbers. We wouldn't care if everything was rosy. Unfortunately, if my experience here, in my ABC, is symptomatic of ABC staffers around the country, we are indeed in desperate need of a massive shake-up from the top, down.

Mark Scott, Kim Dalton and News Management have questions to answer. They need to be held to account for their decision-making. And on a state-by-state basis, the management structure within departments needs a serious re-examination, before any further operational positions are cut.

