

SUBMISSION BY

MEDIA, ENTERTAINMENT & ARTS ALLIANCE

TO

**Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications, Information Technology
and the Arts**

RE: Senate Inquiry into the ABC on the matter of regional diversity



The Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance

The Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance (the Alliance) is the industrial and professional organisation representing the people who work in Australia's media and entertainment industries. Its membership includes journalists, artists, photographers, performers, symphony orchestra musicians and film, television and performing arts technicians.

Introduction

With the national media landscape converging, and the focus of audiences increasingly shifting to online and digital media, never before has the Australian Broadcasting Corporation had a more important or central role to play in the national conversation and public debate.

The ABC has been actively engaged in embracing new services and delivery options for ABC content, however the rate of technological progress is changing Australians' expectations of the ABC and putting our national broadcaster under enormous financial and cultural pressure.

In 2010-11, 79 per cent of the ABC's budget expenditure went to the making and distributing of content. In 2011- 2012 this fell by 1 per cent to 78 per cent – a loss of approximately \$10 million out of content production budgets¹.

The 2012-13 operational revenue from the Government of \$840 million represents a decrease in real funding of \$253 million or 23.1% since 1985-86².

These effects have been felt most keenly in regional ABC centres where comparatively small staffing numbers, communities with diverse needs, geographically dispersed populations, emergency broadcast responsibilities, and issues with technology and the need for greater skills training and ongoing support, has led to increasing pressure on staff aiming to fulfil the ABC's Charter obligations for regional Australians.

While the majority of Alliance journalists and content makers believe the ABC does fulfil its Charter obligations to regional Australians, there is an overwhelming feeling that the current model is not sustainable. Competing demands from multiple platforms and a lack of resources, including cars and laptops for staff in the field, and staff shortages are all taking their toll on content makers and their ability to produce relevant, quality content for their communities.

"We are under great pressure to produce a lot of content and to be across a lot of issues with limited resources and an inability to get out of the office. Stories are covered mostly by phone. Our region stretches from _____ to _____, but I have never been to the uppermost part of our region. I have only ever have one trip paid for – I do a lot of driving instead" – a journalist with 10 years' experience with the ABC.

The Alliance feels that any investigation into whether the ABC is fulfilling its Charter obligations to regional Australians needs to look at whether or not the ABC is sufficiently well-funded to continue expanding into the digital environment while still providing the same quality coverage, and is the ABC sufficiently well-resourced to continue to nurture regional diversity and recognise the talent and dedication of the ABC's best asset: its staff.

Convergence and regional ABC

¹ <http://about.abc.net.au/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/ABC-Annual-Report-2011-12-Part-6.pdf>

² <http://about.abc.net.au/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/ABC-Annual-Report-2011-12-Part-6.pdf>

Although the Federal Government's response to the *Convergence Review* has yet to be released, it is clear from the report that the national broadcaster will continue to play a pivotal role in the media landscape and in the provision of quality content to the Australian public.

Key findings and recommendation of the report include:

- That Australians should have access to Australian content that reflects and contributes to the development of national and cultural identity;
- That legislative change is needed to underpin ongoing investment in a dynamic domestic content production industry;
- That Australians should have access to the broadest possible range of content across platforms, services and devices; and
- That Australians should have access to and opportunities for participation in a diverse mix of services, voices, views and information.

The CPSU and MEAA believe that the ABC is uniquely placed to meet the recommendations of the Convergence Review.

Arguably, nowhere is that more vital than outside of metropolitan areas. Whether it is by bringing the stories of those who live in regional and rural areas to a wider, national audience or ensuring regional rural audiences are informed, connected and entertained, the ABC has obligations to provide the best possible service to regional Australians and to reflect the diversity of Australian society and contribute to a sense of national identity.



Right now, what services does the ABC provide regional Australians with?

ABC radio has always been a pivotal focal point for regional communities: for news, entertainment and debate; and with more platforms able to tell stories regional audiences are interacting with their national broadcaster more directly than ever.



2002

ABC Radio: 4 national radio networks, 1 international radio network, 9 metropolitan radio stations and 48 regional radio stations

ABC Television: 1 national analog television service, 8 local television stations, and Digital television and multi-channelling in 13 towns and cities nationally

ABC Online: ABC Online with more than 900,000 pages of content in narrowband and broadband, and ABC just developing online new services

ABC Commercial: 36 ABC Shops, 82 ABC Centres and ABC Shop Online

ABC Asia Pacific: Just started up an international television and online service (31 Dec)

2012

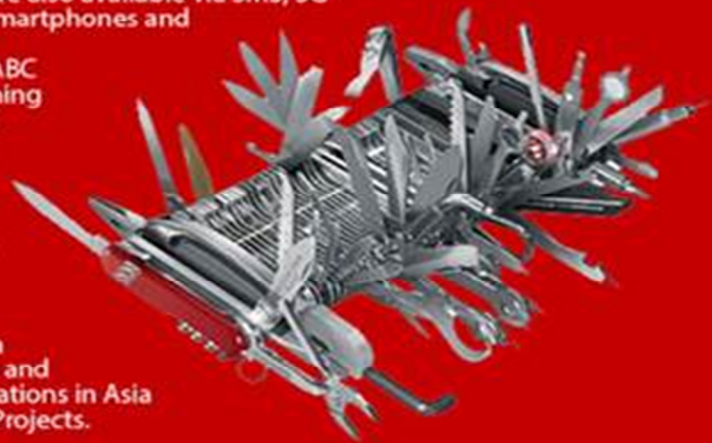
ABC Radio: 4 national networks, 9 metropolitan radio stations, 51 regional radio stations, 11 digital radio channels in each capital city and all digital radio services streamed online and available on free-to-air digital TV services

ABC Television: 4 national digital channels (ABC 1, ABC 2, ABC4Kids, ABC 3 & ABC News 24), 8 local television stations and iView – internet only catch-up television service.

ABC Online: Abc.net.au providing content via streaming, podcasting, vodcasting, video-on-demand and content designed for broadband delivery. ABC services are also available via SMS, 3G and other wireless devices including smartphones and tablets

ABC Commercial: 54 ABC Shops, 106 ABC Centres, ABC Shop Online, ABC Publishing – manages magazines and books, ABC Sales and Distribution responsible for DVD, Content Sales, Licensing, Events, Library and Non-Theatric Sales, ABC Music and Music Publishing, and ABC Digital, developing online and mobile applications.

ABC International: Radio Australia provided on Radio and Online and broadcast in eight languages, Australia Network – and international television and online service and rebroadcast to 46 nations in Asia and the Pacific and ABC International Projects.



Source: CPSU and MEAA joint ABC triennial funding submission

The May 2011 Federal Budget maintained the ABC's funding base, and provided additional funding for a dedicated children's channel, more Australian television drama, and the establishment of regional broadband hubs throughout Australia (implemented as ABC Open).

The ABC Open program invites regional communities to produce and publish photos, stories, videos and sound through the ABC³.

So while regional spending has ostensibly been increased it has not translated into the creation of freeing-up of any extra resources in regional ABC offices and has, in several cases, actually placing additional strain on existing services. Employees increasingly question the ABC's ability to adequately represent and broadcast the issues in their regions.

“Prior to our station getting two additional ABC Open producers, We had one vehicle that had to be shared between our ABC rural reporter and ABC news staff, and now that gets shared with ABC Open as well” – a journalist in charge.

“With ABC Open coming online, there has been money come into regional stations, but not to local radio. We only just got wi-fi in the office here in December. I use my own iPad, which is my choice, but it makes it so much easier to interact with my audience during my program and to interact via social media, which is a big part of what we do. I love the immediacy of that, and the direct contact with the community, but using our own equipment and dealing with out-dated software and slow internet connection has made it hard, and the ABC needs to spend money fixing those things so that we can meet the audience expectations of what the ABC is doing these days” – a presenter.

Is the ABC fulfilling its commitment to reflect and represent regional diversity in Australia?

In an era where the fragmenting media landscape means newspapers are downsizing or closing in regional areas, it is more important than ever that the ABC is funded to remain a news-forward, responsive and in-depth provider of quality news for regional Australians.

Likewise, regional Australians also need to have access to an avenue and service that provides the opportunity for their stories to reach outside their communities and become part of the national discourse.

While the digital space and online initiatives like ABC Open and *Heywire* have provided wonderful opportunities to share rural and regional stories in a way never before possible, the pull of funding from regions to centralised production initiatives like News24 has meant travel budgets have shrunk, aging equipment is not being replaced and comprehensive formal skills training is provided sporadically, at, best, by the ABC.

Anecdotally, this has led to less widespread and diverse coverage, a failure to adequately explore and cover Indigenous and LGBT stories and social issues in some communities, stress and frustration with out-dated and outmoded technology and more pressure on staff, particularly rural reporters, to put in big hours and long drives.

³ <https://open.abc.net.au/about>

“Dealing in a highly technological environment as the ABC is, it’s fair to say there are a lot of frustrations in trying to get things repaired and back efficiently so you can get on and do your work. Staff are on your back: ‘Where is my computer?’ and at times you are tearing your hair out. There are times when I’ve been upside with a screwdriver, trying to fix something, hoping that I don’t short-circuit the entire ABC!” –presenter/station manager.

“It would have to be a budget thing for sure. Convincing ABC management to provide funding for a position that you have never had [at your station] can be difficult.” -station manager

Journalists report they rarely leave the ABC office and are spending less and less time gathering stories out in the community and more time spent behind a desk, filing for a growing range of story platforms:

“Our coverage would be so much more in-depth if we could get out of the office and go places. It was my New Year’s resolution to myself this year that I would make sure our younger reporters get out on the road at least once a month so that the community can see them, and so that people out there realise we are going to be at that council meeting, or that we will be covering that function. When you’re in the field you pick up so many stories, but we rarely have time these days... Young journalists [who are] trapped inside are not getting all the skills they need.” – a journalist-in-charge

With less ability to be out in their community, collecting stories, Alliance members say the quality and depth of the coverage they provide is not as good as it could be if there were more people to do the job, and they had the budgets available to them to stay overnight and spend time in the communities they are reporting on.

Changes to the ABC's dedicated rural programming and news service

In 2010, changes were implemented by the ABC to the way rural reporting was structured.

Geographically large and diverse “patches”, each with their own dedicated rural reporter to source, produce and broadcast stories gathered from that region, were amalgamated, with reporters paired up with a colleague and relegated to the office one week out of two on a “one-in, one-out” shift arrangement.

The changes were ostensibly made by the ABC due to safety concerns about reporters driving through such large areas.

The move was met with widespread condemnation from both staff and communities, who felt their voice had been diluted further, and many staff viewed the changes as the direct result of further budget cuts to regional radio.

Several years on, Alliance members say the amalgamation of these regions has diminished the breadth of coverage provided and adversely impacted the ability of the ABC to represent regional diversity and contribute stories that inform and underpin a national sense of identity.

“There has been a decline in local radio services in the previous three years, especially the local-based rural reports... leading to a loss of local based content, and not as much air-time to reflect the diversity of issues [from] regional Australia” – a rural reporter.

“We could do with more rural reporter positions. We provide the content that ABC programs live off - we break the stories. When they become issues - the programs pick up on them. We tell the world the issues. We break the stories that regional papers then cover - sometimes a week later. There is no quality or analysis in the commercial media in the regions. There are so many stories that we try to dig at but can't get to the bottom - because of resources” – a senior journalist.



Centralised production and what that has meant for regional coverage, the ABC, its Charter and regional journalists

ABC Alliance members identified the drain of resources to metropolitan centres as one of the key factors having a major impact on the quality, breadth and depth of the coverage and interaction they were capable of having with their local community.

Three years ago, the ABC started its continuous news channel without any additional funding from the Government. In 2012, News24 now accounts for 10 per cent of the Corporation's annual news budget of about \$150 million.

Since the launch of News24, ABC staff and their unions have observed that the ABC is struggling to resource news adequately. Quality and work practices are being compromised and stretched to breaking point and it is the ABC staff that are being asked to carry the burden.

Almost all members the Alliance spoke to identified resources as their biggest impediment to delivering quality, comprehensive content and services for their communities.

There is a widespread perception among staff in regional centres that the creation of News24 from existing budgets siphoned funding away from regional production and is a key factor in why more radio programs are being shared, or "networked", across regions, and why staff are not being replaced, or "back-filled" when they were on leave.

"ABC News 24 seems to absorb a huge amount of resources. We've been told not to say this to the public, and I understand the need for News 24 but to fund it out of existing funds was one hell of an ask and we're all paying for it" – a journalist in charge.

"Resourcing is the biggest challenge for us here, and the loss of TV production in Tasmania was the result of a similar thing – it is all about cost-based decisions. And the imperative pushing this is that no one has the resources as a result of how News 24 was set up" – journalist.

"Shrinking budgets were the main reason I left - the rural reporter's role I had was changed into a shift role due to budget constraints. News 24 has resulted in a thinning out of resources in the regions, and this has impacted on working conditions" – a former ABC reporter.

"There needs to be more resources [made available by Government] for News24. That would ensure that the "hungry beast" is not taking away from us" – a producer.

Television production in the regions.

Both ABC staff and the unions condemn the closure of television production in Tasmania, and the ensuing loss of jobs and skills from regional areas. We deplore the loss of such a valuable training ground and the loss of specialisation that goes with closing regional production centres.

It is clear from members' testimony that a widespread lack of investment in regional production, particularly audio-visual production facilities and capabilities, has stymied the production of quality visual content in regional centres.

Audio visual production by regional teams, once touted by ABC management as an important venture for expanding online coverage and content in regional ABC centres, seems to have fallen by the wayside as budgets have dried up.

There is a feeling from regional ABC content makers that they are letting the communities they serve down by not having the resources, time and personnel to create the kinds of powerful, important, revealing and in-depth coverage that reflects and represents the diversity of regional communities and their inhabitants.

“Our federal MP has been calling for a regional-produced television news bulletin by the ABC up here for years. We have such a big area to cover, and while there were promises a few years back for more audio-visual production training for us, so we could produce vision ourselves for our website, it simply hasn't eventuated, there just isn't any money” – a presenter.

A number of cross media reporters, content makers skilled in the production of radio broadcast, audio visual production and online packages, were hired across the country to realise the ABC's vision for greater audio-visual content for regional internet users.

But most have found they have been unable to produce the quantity and quality of vision for their ABC Local websites they would like. Members cite several reasons for this: a lack of staff to be able to cover for them while they film, compile and produce in-depth audio visual content; the ongoing daily demands of multiple platforms that allow little time for creative or investigative work outside the office; and the lack of travel budgets.

What are the threats to ensuring the ABC fulfils its commitment to reflect and represent regional diversity in Australia?

By failing to adequately fund the ABC, in particular regional programming, there is a very real risk the ABC will not be able to fulfil its Charter obligation to foster a sense of national diversity, in all its myriad forms, by bringing the stories, news and current affairs from regional communities into the national discourse.

The ABC is now the emergency broadcaster across the country, and regional communities rely on the up-to-date coverage provided by the ABC's broadcasters and online service in times of crisis. Nowhere more has this been evident than in the ABC's coverage of the bushfires in Tasmania, Victoria and NSW over the past few weeks.

However, with often expansive areas to cover and report on, and with many staff encouraged by ABC management to take leave during this "quiet" time of year, resources are often stretched and normal services are not maintained to the same level during that period.

While procedures are in place to ensure emergency service broadcasting is not affected, normal services such as local radio websites, blogs and Twitter feeds are often left unstaffed and not updated regularly due to the time pressures on already busy staff.

"I think regional stations are really good with doing a lot for a little... We are often asked to work over Christmas with no producer, and I wonder why are we being asked to do that over the bushfire danger weeks in summer? It is disheartening" – a presenter.

"There is often a sense of scrambling to keep up with the growing amount of work we're asked to do across platforms, and we are not necessarily doing the best we could... we're certainly not able to be consistent with that. One example was with the bushfires last week, posting stuff to program blogs just stops, and I know that staff feel really bad about that, because the community need us there, but it is a case of... marrying up the resources that we have with what we are asked to do" – a journalist.

"People are told to tune into their ABC during emergencies and many people still can't even do that here because of reception difficulties... For whatever historical reason, we have two transmitter sites and we've been telling management for years they need to close one down make the other, higher one stronger." – a journalist in charge

Regardless of which party, politicians agree

Malcolm Turnbull, shadow minister Communications and Broadband -

The role of the ABC is crucial now. The fact of the matter is that the great foundations of journalism have been the newspapers, historically. They've employed the most reporters, they've done the most reporting, and they have set the agenda in terms of the bulk of the news coverage.

What's happening is that their business model is being dramatically undermined by the internet, and the drift of advertising dollars away to other digital platforms. And so the viability, indeed the survivability, of many newspapers is very questionable. And if they do survive as digital publications, they're unlikely ever again to have the reporting depth in terms of the journalistic resources that they had in their heyday as printed.⁴

Warren Entsch, LNP, Member for Leichhardt, Chief Opposition Whip-

So the ABC by default is becoming more and more important. The role of the public broadcaster becomes more important – having a source of news and information that is well-funded is really crucial, and so the ABC becomes more important than ever.” “The area I come from is rural, regional and also very, very remote, going all the way up to the outer islands of the Torres Strait, and the ABC is absolutely critical for current affairs, news, and a broad range of information, like stock reports - in many cases the ABC is the only place where these events are discussed, particularly radio. I think ABC Radio is an absolutely vital piece of social infrastructure for my electorate in particular.

The ABC needs to keep full capacity in Tasmania for a number of reasons, not least of which because we produce some pretty good television shows. I think the ABC is absolutely critical to the transition of Tasmania, from the old resources base to the knowledge, service information high quality niche market base.⁵

Senator for Tasmania and Leader of the Greens, Christine Milne –

I absolutely can't tell you how critical the ABC is to the quality of life in rural and regional Australia. In my own experience, it was the ABC that brought the Franklin River blockade to households throughout Australia, it was the ABC that helped me in saving the huts at Cradle Mountain and one of the tragedies when we lost the 7.30 Report from rural and regional areas is the local campaigns weren't able to be explained.

Now with climate change, we are going to see so much adjustment in rural and regional Australia, adaptation to climate change –there are so many human stories in rural and regional Australia and we need the ABC out there bringing them to the whole nation.

⁴ <http://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/1661566/Turnbull-says-trust-in-ABC-%27crucial%27-as-newspapers-fall/>

⁵ Media Alliance Interview November 18, 2012, Parliament House, Canberra, ACT

I have seen the ABC having to do more and more with less funding over a long period of time. That has meant a lot more centralisation back to the powers that be in Sydney and Melbourne and a loss of capacity in rural and regional areas. We need to fund the ABC. We need the ABC for quality of life and who we are as a nation.

We need the ABC to be really well funded if you are going to have a cohesive, multicultural Australia. If you are going to have a country where reconciliation means something then the ABC has to bring you the faces and stories of the Kimberley. The ABC has to bring you stories of refugees being taken in by rural and regional communities and making a difference, creating new jobs, and the [wider] community won't know how this is happening unless the ABC brings those very important human stories and that's part of making us a cohesive and progressive society.⁶

ALP Senator for Queensland, Claire Moore –

I come from regional Queensland, so when I was growing up the ABC was just part of the day, on the radio and then on the TV, and I think the main value of the relationship between Australians and their ABC is a sense of trust, responsibility and ownership - they feel they know the ABC, and that trust has been built up over many years. That pronoun our ABC is not just a token, and you cannot operate without effective funding, so if we are going to have a truly independent media that is part of our nation, we have to fund it adequately.

In the past the ABC played an extraordinarily important role in the training of future technicians and talent. People got the chance, through the ABC to learn their skills which then go across Australia, through different parts of media, and across the world. We can't lose that, the development of talent, that is an intrinsic part of the public broadcaster.⁷



⁶ Media Alliance Interview November 17, 2012, Parliament House, Canberra, ACT

⁷ Media Alliance Interview November 17, 2012, Parliament House, Canberra, ACT

Summary

The Alliance believes that the ABC needs to invest in its greatest asset-talented, dedicated staff in the regions if the ABC is to realise its vision and develop a service that expands its audience reach, innovates and grows with the shift to digital media environment, but that also retains core quality services and production training for regional areas.

For almost 30 years, funding for the ABC has been declining in real dollar terms – a funding hole of \$253 million since 1985-86 - while at the same time the services of the ABC have expanded into a range of new platforms. The ABC now operates a multitude of online and, digital sites and broadcasting options as well as being stretched to provide resource-intensive emergency broadcasting capabilities for local communities.

But after three decades of real funding declines coupled with increased demand for its services, the strain has begun to show. Cracks have begun to appear and the ABC is now in real danger of being unable to fulfil its Charter obligations to the very audiences that may need the ABC the most: the regions.

Without additional funding from the Federal Government, it is difficult to see how the current model will be sustainable into the future. This long-term loss of funding must be restored, a sensible equilibrium must be achieved and the great promise of the ABC's Charter must be delivered to ensure a fair go for Australians in remote, rural and regional Australia.

The Alliance believes that the ABC's funding crisis has reached a tipping point. Only urgent action can prevent what is now crisis in ABC regional operations from developing into a major calamity.

Without additional funding from the Federal Government, it is difficult to see how the current model will be sustainable into the future.

Recommendations

1. That the Federal government commit greater funding to the ABC, in particular to the creation of content – broadcast, online and televisual – that reflects the diversity of the Australian population; and
2. In that, that the Government provides tied funding to specific areas of the ABC, including
 - i. News and Current Affairs, including a review of current travel budgets and investment in investigative journalism; and
 - ii. Regional production, chiefly to the training of existing staff, and the hiring of new staff; and
 - iii. A systematic audit of equipment, like computers, servers, office vehicles; and
 - iv. A systematic audit of software to ensure staff are not encountering technological difficulties which cost valuable time and effort; and
 - v. Funding for the continuation of skills upgrading for staff, including an expansion of the current training programs; and investment in greater audio-visual skills training, and backfilling those positions while staff receive training.