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The Australian Broadcasting Corporation's commitment to reflecting and representing regional diversity

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to this inquiry.

I worked in an operational role at the ABC in Tasmania (and other states) for a number of years. Over that time I saw a decline in the number of programs and level of output from the smaller states and a trend towards centralisation of the best work and programs to the major centres. I maintain contact with many still working within the ABC who inform me these trends are not only continuing but accelerating, with reductions in budgets, staff numbers and hours of television output.

For example, the money saved through centralising aspects of operations such as the television presentation function into an ABC external venture in NSW did not return to the states, but was used to fund News 24 and perhaps other initiatives based in Sydney. The same is true about the money saved through introducing new technology to enable downsizing the 7PM News studio crews in the states from six operators down to one – none of those savings were reinvested in the states.

Ironically, one of the key features of the centralisation of the TV presentation function and cheaper to produce News bulletins was to enable greater local output, such as regional television News bulletins and state specific television programs – none of which eventuated.

Those that work within the organisation are convinced that the same will occur with the current closing of the television production unit, ceasing production of Auction Room and local sport coverage and decommissioning of outside broadcast facilities. Sixteen jobs and the flow-on will be lost to the state to be replaced with a \$500,000 per year co-production fund. Any savings will go back to the television division and will be spent in Sydney.

In West Australia and South Australia where the co-production model the ABC is pursuing has been implemented, state and federal government funds are supporting external facilities while leaving some equivalent internal facilities idle. Effectively taxpayers in those states are underwriting the cost of continuing television production in their States while the ABC centralises production into NSW and to a lesser extent Victoria.

ABC employees in those states tell me that there have been massive overruns and questionable deals to get those co-productions on-air and some have had to be “rescued” by internal staff more familiar with production requirements. Apparently, the dollar value of taxpayer funded ABC facilities

used by co-producers is sometimes maximised to increase the producer offset able to be claimed. The obscure claims of turning one dollar into three dollars' worth of production have not been supported by any facts or figures.

ABC television executives hide behind the "commercial in confidence" pretence to conceal deals with a small number of "independent" producers who seem to be the beneficiaries of a disproportionate share of the ABC's co-production funds, far in excess of the \$500,000 per annum being offered to Tasmania.

Kim Dalton, who recently resigned as director of ABC Television (only to return as a consultant) has made no secret of wanting to close down internal production for a long time. Now he is probably consulting to those same "independent" producers as well as the ABC. It will be interesting to see who is appointed his successor.

There is no transparency at all around the use of government funding to the ABC flowing to "independent" producers. It is said in the corridors of the ABC that the Television division is not run by creative producers but creative accountants. The rumours are strong and an external audit of the commissioning of co-productions might put minds to rest. It would also be interesting to see a year-by-year top ten list of the total investment the ABC Television has made with individual co-production companies for the past five years. Not by individual production which might breach "commercial in confidence" principles, just the totals by company. Such a list would make an interesting comparison with the ABC Television investment in the states, (not including internal facilities – the facilities are separately funded and owned after all, and some like the Outside Broadcast van acquired in the early 2000's with a special digitisation appropriation by now totally depreciated). I suspect that the investment with some companies exceeds the Television division spend in some states.

Cost of production is being used as an excuse to remove production from the state. Cost of production is a fallacious argument on at least two counts. Firstly, field based, small crew productions (such as Gardening Australia, Catalyst and Auction Room) cost a similar amount no matter where they are produced – there are no high cost fixed studio facilities required. Secondly, it is apparently well known amongst staff that up to 2010 the Tasmanian branch had record efficiency levels in resourcing operational staff for television production and had the lowest internal hourly rate of any ABC branch in the country – proof that production in the regions is cost competitive. This was undermined when the television division started to reduce the level of production from the state when Collectors ceased to be produced. Producing ten programs for Auction Rooms in the same timeframe (and with the same TV production unit staff numbers) that 40 programs of Collectors or Gardening Australia was produced was always going to artificially inflate the cost per program. In the last triennial funding round an additional appropriation was made specifically for television drama, all of which has been channelled through NSW, using mostly Sydney based staff even when produced outside NSW. This serves to highlight the fact that even less of the "normal" ABC TV budget is being spent in the states.

ABC Open is held up as an example of regional storytelling and does great work at a grass roots level, but does not in any way replace the craft skills of a team of producers, camera, audio and edit operators making prime time television programs. While the initiative is commendable it is in no way mature and we are a long way from a ubiquitous, Australia wide, broadband delivery mechanism to maximise the reach of ABC Open. Also, ABC Open was funded by an additional appropriation from the federal government, therefore any outcome; no matter how good or promising is irrelevant to the current discussion. Additional money being spent across regional Australia is always welcome, but it should not replace what was already being spent.

The ABC used to do a number of high profile programs from Tasmania, many of which won awards, others widely known and still going strong such as Gardening Australia (which is now produced from Melbourne). Tasmania has been allowed to produce only shorter and shorter runs of programs which they claim have failed to grow an audience, but rather than return to the proven formula of an ongoing series the television executives in Sydney would prefer that Tasmania produces nothing.

This decision is effectively de-skilling the state. Not all creative people live in Sydney; Tasmania has an incredibly vibrant arts scene and a unique island perspective that people bring to their work. It not only disadvantages those losing their jobs now, but those yet to join the industry, effectively cutting off many opportunities for Tasmanians.

The true value of the ABC to Australians is not defined by simple ratings numbers or the cost of a program, but needs to take into account the broader cultural and social implications.

Excerpts from the 2008 Senate review report into ABC and SBS;

“In an environment where quality video and audio can be delivered seamlessly via an internet-enabled device—in the home or on the move—an important differentiator between media organisations will be their content.”

“This consultation process extended the conversation on the future of the national broadcasters that began with the Australia 2020 Summit, held in Canberra in April 2008. Summit participants emphasised the role of the national broadcasters in promoting Australian culture and stories and in engaging with Australia’s creative sector, providing children’s programming and supporting an engaged and informed citizenry.”

“The importance of key programming genres for the national broadcasters:

— Quality Australian programming that provides Australians with a shared sense of identity and that supports our arts and cultural sector.

— Comprehensive programming of both general appeal and specialised or niche services, particularly for the ABC.”

“Over 700 submissions supported the ABC’s broader role in the provision of Australian programming that reflects our culture and identity.”

The ABC's Managing Director, Mark Scott has been quoted in the Australian saying;

"At the ABC, we want to reflect the nation to the nation," Mr Scott said. "But it does not automatically follow that in order to do this, the ABC has to be the creator of that television everywhere."

That may be the case, in the same way that creating television everywhere except NSW would also be possible – but it would be a much poorer and unbalanced reflection of the nation to the nation. In the same way that a visitor to a foreign country has a different experience to a resident - to truly reflect the nation necessitates people in every state and territory actively involved on every platform in an ongoing manner.

The ABC National Cultural Policy Submission of October 2011 states;

"As Australia's national public broadcaster, the ABC is a significant cultural institution and plays a central role in sustaining and contributing to the cultural life of the nation. It is one of few organisations participating actively in all three areas of cultural endeavour identified as the scope of the National Cultural Policy in the Government's discussion paper."

That document goes on to discuss "Encouraging Australian television production" stating;

"As a medium, television delivers economic, social and cultural dividends; television content is an important part of the Australian Cultural landscape."

The ABC submission to the Senate Inquiry in September 2011 Stated;

"The program changes announced on 2 August will not impact the ABC's ability to commission content from internal sources in Brisbane, Adelaide, Perth and Hobart or to enter into co-productions in those cities."

It went on to respond to the question of future potential implications of these cuts on ABC's capacity to broadcast state football and rugby;

"The changes announced on 2 August have no implications on the ABC's capacity to broadcast state football and rugby"

With the decommissioning of the Outside Broadcast facility the ABC will not have the capacity to broadcast state football or any other sport. The number of Outside Broadcast events covered will be severely limited by the cost of shipping the facilities and flying in crew from interstate. Only two or three television Outside Broadcasts per annum and planned and due to the additional cost compared to every other state that number is only likely to reduce rather than increase.

It would seem that the ABC's concept of "future potential implications" is rather short term because in the year since these documents were published a number of statements are now false. Internal

capacity in West Australia and Tasmania have gone, what weight should be put on any ABC commitments to future activity in South Australia or Queensland.

Perhaps it is time that this, “significant cultural institution [which] plays a central role in sustaining and contributing to the cultural life of the nation” is not left to the whims of a few transient executives and opaque deals with “independent” producers.

Perhaps it is time for a different framework for ABC funding that would see a more equitable return to the states other than NSW. This could potentially be along the same lines as that used in the UK for the BBC with guidelines provided by Ofcom.

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