

Democratising the ABC for the Digital Age

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Introduction

In August 2011 the ABC's Director of Television Kim Dalton announced cuts to the National Broadcaster's in-house 'arts' and other programming. This decision was made on the basis of falling audiences, financial pressures and the need to refresh tired infotainment formats through partnerships with independent producers. It was sweetened with the promise that cultural programming will henceforth be directed to more in depth documentary coverage of the arts commissioned from independent filmmakers. To remain responsive to audiences, media content is ever subject to review and necessary creative destruction. However, the ABC has struggled in recent years to make a mark as an 'arts' broadcaster, and that may be because of outdated romantic definitions of the arts and professional practices that fail to connect broader notions of culture with creative participation by audiences in the ABC's programming.

These recent ABC programming decisions must be considered by the Senate Inquiry in the context of larger, and in some senses unprecedented, challenges facing public broadcasting in the era of digital media and the break up of the old twentieth century mass media paradigm. The ABC is grappling with how to transform itself from a paternalistic public broadcaster catering to a loyal if passive audience to a multi-channel narrow-caster, engaging diverse and conditional audiences that have an expectation that they will participate, or at least be consulted, in content creation. While many innovators within the ABC are rising to this challenge, the wider public debate has been a sterile contest between those neo-liberals who loath a state broadcaster which they imagine to be a nest of radicals, and those social democrats, well meaning but nostalgic 'friends' and old-style conservatives who uncritically love an 'Aunty' that is no more. Unfortunately, opposition during cuts and attacks on the ABC in the Howard years have led to a negative siege mentality that stops people who value the ABC from doing hard thinking about how public broadcasting needs to change to remain relevant to emerging audiences with different, and in many ways more exacting, expectations of media.

Managing Director Mark Scott's 2008 ambition for six digital television channels to be achieved by 2020 now looks set to be exceeded, with 4 channels already serving audiences, including the edgy ABC 2, ABC 3 dedicated children and young adult, and News 24 as well as the 'watch when you like' ABC Online Iview service. Scott's multichannel digital vision is to be welcomed for demonstrating that the ABC is preparing to appeal to audiences in their diversity, by moving from broadcasting to narrow casting.¹ Having multi-channels like the BBC potentially allows Aunty to cater for the different niche tastes of her numerous nephews and nieces without offending each other's sense of quality. However these will require additional resources from government if they are to

be genuine, as is evident with News 24 could do with an injection of funds and fresh program ideas.

Scott sees the ABC's future as a virtual town square where different parts of Australian society can come together – a commons where the diversity is channelled into a national conversation. The *Q and A* experiment is one example of this idea, harnessing the various old and new media, from a town hall meeting to lap top video to twitter in one panel show. What is so far missing from Scott's vision, however, is an appreciation that emerging audiences want to participate in content creation and interact with program makers and each other in the actual design and commissioning of programs, to propose, produce, curate and vote on pilots and program ideas Youtube style that the ABC might consider. This is what digital technology and the internet do well, but the danger is the continuation of the old paternalist model of public broadcasting where passive audiences simply consume what is offered by program makers who know best. To deliver the multi-channel nirvana envisaged by Scott, the ABC must deal with structural and cultural problems in the corporation inimical to diversity that have intensified since the late 1990s. Luckily, there are changes under way on the ground at the ABC that are laying the foundations for further cultural democracy.

The Pymble Broadcasting Corporation

The ABC continues to suffer from a too homogenous a view of Australian culture, imposed through management structures that have centralised control of television content in the hands of a few senior executives. There is insufficient consultation with audiences about programming - signified by an over reliance on commercial ratings - and inadequate community participation in ABC corporate decision-making.

Over the past two decades the layers of management bureaucracy and its remuneration increased at the ABC while creative craftspeople were shed at a time when successful private corporations flattened their management and gave greater autonomy to team-based production. The report of the Australian National Audit Office, *Corporate Governance in the Australian Broadcasting Corporation*, prepared under Jonathon Shier's Managing Directorship, identified a problem of managers working up to the apex of the corporate pyramid, rather than down to stakeholders. Translated to TV, that can mean that shows are green-lighted because the Director of TV or senior commissioners like them, rather than in reference to audiences or Charter obligations.

The challenge for us today is rethinking the public sector from the midst of the information revolution. Media is moving beyond a crude dichotomy between the old elite public broadcasting and the old commercial broadcasting that appeals to the lowest common denominator. Twenty-first century media is concerned with audiences in their diversity, satisfying those niche interests that help to make us unique and encourage a vibrant, complex dialogue between cultures and self-programming and curation. Hence the decline in use of free-to-air TV by younger audiences and their attraction to the internet and other digital platforms.

Luckily the Charter supports this approach by committing the ABC to "broadcast programs that contribute to a sense of national identity and inform and entertain and reflect the cultural diversity of, the Australian Community." Perceptions of what constitutes "quality" and innovation depend on particular cultural literacies which nowadays are not shared by a community criss-crossed by aesthetic and attitudinal divides overlaying differences in age education, class, ethnicity and geography. This is the real challenge for a national broadcaster but one that the ABC hopes to meet by multi-channelling.

Back in 2002 the Auditor found that "there has been a decline in ABC share of younger adult viewers (under 40), but an increase in ABC share of older viewers". This is less about youth than changing media patterns. The evidence shows young people are watching less and less free-to-air TV that looks to common denominators. The "loyal" ABC viewer is making way for the discriminating conditional viewer, who makes an individual choice from the array of media options at their disposal - the websites, blogs, books, videos, games, pay TV, radio, cinema, mobiles, chat lines, magazines and commercial TV - on the basis of personal interests and passions. Media that seek to treat the under-40s as one group, to attract them on the basis of what they are assumed to have in common, will have no audience. The establishment of ABC 3 for older children and teens, the Gen Y/Gen X sensibility of ABC 2, innovative comedy from the Arts and Entertainment division, the new Triple J network 'Unearthed' for Australian independent music and the associated websites and social media go along way responding to younger generations with different aesthetics and media interaction patterns.

However an ABC's diversity and innovation deficit is still apparent in its monolithic perception of an "ABC audience" within much of news and current affairs programming, the infotainment magazine programs (including arts), documentary and especially drama. The formulaic form of much of this fodder reflects the shared assumptions of those who commission, and the ABC's failure to range widely enough in recruiting program-making talent. Take ABC news and current affairs simplistic definition of 'objective' as telling both sides of a story. For all the huff and puff about the ABC's left wing bias, having only 2 wings - right and left as represented by Labor and Coalition - is a pretty narrow debate. There are a lot more perspectives out there and the 'he said, she said' focus on the big 2 parties - often led by an agenda set each morning by the press oligopoly - limits the menu of policy options that the ABC tests politicians against.

When I was at the ABC in the late 80s and 90s a left-liberal, harbour hugging tertiary educated attitude to social issues prevailed alongside a pro-market bias in economics and a rather old fashioned bush and Kokoda track nationalism. As a young ABC doco maker this world view struck me as pretty conventional, conservative, middle brow and incurious. It still does. But many program makers wanted content that was more risky, dangerous, intellectually challenging and experimental rather than reverential of TV rules. Content that dared to be offensive. This occasionally came along in comedies like *Front Line*, in youth initiatives such as *Beat Box*, in a succession of award winning (and high rating) documentaries produced in the late 1980s and 90s such as *Cop It Sweet* and

in gritty drama such as *Blue Murder*. It still does in the comedy area with *The Chaser* and *Summer Heights High*, but more often the story is one of senior managers spending a great deal of money blinding out programs to appeal to what they imagine to be the "core" audience. This is sometimes referred to in ratings jargon as the As and Bs but I was told "mate, we make programs for Pymble", just as Mike Carlton a decade later was told to imagine his Radio 702 listener as a neighbour in Epping. This is perhaps what John Howard had in mind when he described the ABC as our enemies talking to our friends.

I suspect program makers are projecting their own tastes, prejudices and backgrounds on to the potential audience. A rare iconoclast among content commissioners, former head of Arts and Entertainment Courtney Gibson who attracted young audiences with new comedy, criticised the ABC in the *Weekend Australian Magazine* as "too white, too straight, too middle class ... If you don't have diversity in the production offices, you're never going to get it on screen".² I don't think Gibson meant we need a politically correct mandarin-slice view of the world. Rather there are vibrant cultures that the ABC is failing to tap in its programming.

What perspectives is an ABC viewer denied? Even if many staff are republican the ABC remains the great defender of British culture in Australia and persists in maintaining a colonial deference to the BBC as the benchmark for quality. However the historic reliance on BBC imports dominating prime time on ABC 1 is at last being corrected on ABC 2 by a belated programming of innovative programs like *The Wire* and *Deadwood* made for HBO in the United States.

At least the Brits know how to make risky cosmopolitan TV. Because of the existence of SBS, the ABC has never really come to terms with its Charter responsibility to reflect Australia's ethnic diversity. Non-anglos still appear on ABC TV shows as well-meaning tokens, loudly justified by an ethnic plot development or issue, rather than as a natural part of the Australian mix. Anglo-Celtic, inner urban program makers present ethnic difference and hybridisation of cultures in the back blocks as an unusual disruption to the Anglo-Aussie mainstream rather what it is - the major narrative of contemporary Australia. For this reason the ABC struggles to make sense of factions in party politics or power struggles among socially mobile migrants in the outer suburbs as revealed by the Wollongong corruption scandal. In the early noughties the auditor identified an under-use of the ABC by lower socio-economic audiences. The ABC remains good at exhibiting working class individuals and communities as subjects with problems to be diagnosed or eccentricities to be celebrated, but always they are presented as 'the other' to an assumed middle class audience. The Paul Fenech *Pizza* franchise on SBS and the films of David Caesar show a different approach, where creative program makers have emerged from these communities with different, often confronting aesthetics from the perspective of middle class tastes.

Reversing the trend to centralisation in Sydney would also assist diversity, by allowing commissioners in the so-called "BAPH states"(Brisbane-Adelaide-Perth-Hobart), and even regions to establish relationships with local creative communities. The BBC's

decentralisation has enabled it to harvest the talents of Manchester, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales in its drama, variety and current affairs. As long as the states provide most government services in Australia ABC TV needs more state-focused scrutiny than one night a week. The decline of government standards and services at the state level is partly attributable to media disinterest including the abandonment of the state-based *7.30 Report*. I suggest a new nightly current affairs vehicle at 7.30 pm more *Insiders* in style that ditches the human interest guff of *7.30 Report* for 15 minutes on the state in which the program is viewed.

Freeing up Content and Outsourcing

So how can the ABC better harvest the risky and original stuff that emerges from outside the official TV culture that the ABC's managerialism usually filters out?

First, the commissioning and budget power currently wielded by the position of Director of Television needs to be dispersed down by returning to the old system where a variety of departmental heads, commissioning editors control content and executive producers are trusted with editorial authority over their own autonomous units, with programming decisions to be reviewed annually. Such a 'competition policy' will restore creative friction to the ABC and provide more diversity as occurs at both the BBC and Chanel Four in the UK.

Outsourcing is often offered as the panacea for engaging program makers outside the silo. Much non-news and current affairs content - drama, docos, comedy - is now either outsourced or produced internally by external production companies. I have admiration for the work of both in-house ABC program makers and the independents. It's an artificial divide as so many independent producers are ex-ABC staff who reckon they get a better deal this way. It is often the case that, free from managerial interference and compromise, contracted production teams led by cultural entrepreneurs like Chris Lilley, The Chaser or Zapruder's Other Productions Andrew Denton are able to break more aesthetic rules, cut red tape, and negotiate more creative autonomy, especially in comedy and documentary. These partnerships are to be applauded as they enable the ABC to intersect with the wider Australian creative community than exists in its own silo. This reality harmonises with the vision of the ABC as a 'town square' rather than a factory.

However, this outsourcing is far from transparent and the ABC needs to spread its patronage more widely and beyond present incumbents. Many of the large commercial production houses, especially in drama, favour formula and lowest common denominator over innovation, yet their proposals are green-lighted while those of genuinely cutting edge independents are spiked. Outsourcing needs to be governed by legislated rules and benchmarks and be scrutinized by the Federal Parliament. It matters less whether programs are made in house or out than that this public commissioning is spread equitably and those taking the money are accountable and deliver value-for taxpayers dollars. The current gene pool is too narrow in terms of class, ethnicity and region (and the usual suspects) and the ABC needs to engage with storytellers from beyond the TV industry working in literature, cinema, theatre, music and even computer games.

Progressives ignore reforming the current outsourcing practices because they favour in-house production, but this horse has truly bolted, and the debate is about how to ensure emerging innovators get the nod rather than the same old mates. Risky ideas should be hot-housed and allowed to cultivate a cult audience first, perhaps through curation on ABC Online where audiences can comment and even modify the project in development. I would like to look at the parlous state of ABC drama as an example of an old programming paradigm failing to deliver.

Drama Drought

In recent years the ABC and its private co-production partners have failed to live up to its potential as the power-house of Australian fictional story telling, especially when compared to HBO, Channel 4, even the BBC. Instead of the brain and aesthetic stretching of *The Sopranos*, *Deadwood*, *Rome* or *The Wire* the ABC persists in cuddling up with bucolic melodramas like *East of Everything* and *Valentine's Day* where sensitive middle class white breads talk plot development, mid life crisis and last decade's political correctness. This stodgy state of ABC drama has less to do with funding than the aesthetic and intellectual conservatism of production houses, a failure to engage with storytellers in the wider creative community and obsession by commissioners with a narrow range of genres. The ABC Drama department and its preferred commercial production houses are locked into expensive budgets and pedestrian, out of date script writing and a bland house style that made a mini-series on East Timor look like *Police Rescue*. For every critical and popular hit like the Cleo biopic *Paper Giants*, we get too many *Crownies* – underwhelming and naïve series that seem to go on and on.

The problems with ABC drama go much deeper than money. Spending too much money may indeed be part of the problem. Good drama need not be expensive, and often it is the low budget guerrilla independents that produce the interesting, innovative work. Where many big budget bonanzas play it safe it is the ABC's lower budget comic-dramas, for example *Kath and Kim*, *Double the Fist* and *Summer Heights High*, that take risks, experiment with script and aesthetics, and win passionate audiences and critical praise. These genre-bending cult hits were nurtured not by the ABC Drama department, but by the risk-taking Arts and Entertainment. Furthermore they were produced by smaller, artist-controlled 'independent' companies rather than the bigger drama production houses, that can afford to take risks with ideas and the medium and tend to shoot documentary-style using digital camera. But what they save on production values they make up in script value.

The ABC must move out of the narrow pool of TV drama writers and try novelists, historians and other types of writers on scripts as they do in the UK. Britain has been very good at tapping working class, ethnic and provincial story tellers for its television and cinema - think Dennis Potter's work, *When the Boat Comes In*, *Buddha of Suburbia*, *Shameless*. The ABC needs to find young writers and directors from a variety of backgrounds, beyond the inner cities and elite academies of NIDA and AFTRS, more in touch with the polyglot rustbelts and the new housing estates of the city fringe.

Give writers like Christos Tsiolkas, Helen Garner, Kate Grenville, David Malouf, Frank Moorhouse, Tom Keneally and Peter Carey the opportunity to write drama scripts. Move beyond the Palm Beach/Balmain/Bondi Triangle and find young writers and directors from a variety of backgrounds and media. The collaborative net can be thrown wider to bring other art forms into the drama mix. A collaboration between the ABC, OZ Opera, MusicArts, Dance Films and musicians Paul Kelly, Kev Carmody and composer Maireed Hannan produced *One Night the Moon*, a tragic tale of a lost child in the outback condemned to die because of the impasse between white and aboriginal world views. This strange hybrid brilliantly directed by Rachel Perkins and enjoying limited theatrical release shows that great art is within the ABC's grasp when it goes outside its comfort zone.

Much ABC drama seems to suffer from an odd corporate work practice whereby an issue is work shopped, and then various characters and plot lines riveted together to produce a politically correct morality play. High standards have been set internationally, and drama needs to play with notions of truth and the medium, in the manner of Stephen Poliakoff's *The Lost Prince* or Michael Winterbottom's *24 Hour Party People* rather than approach their subjects with awe and reverence.

In Hollywood and at the BBC they look to published literature for more nuanced story telling. Why don't ABC drama commissioners look to the wealth of a century and a half of Australian novels and plays? Cue *The Term of His Natural Life*, *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*, *Illywacker* or *Double Man*. Building on *Body Surfers*, *Shark Net* and now *The Slap* it's time to adapt new novels by Australians such as *Bride Stripped Bare*, *Secret River* and *The Slap*. We need more historical drama in the tradition of *James Cook* and *Curtin*, the Nineteenth Century Australian history and literature is a mine of great stories and characters. No one minds a bit of Dickens and Austen on a Sunday night, but what about Marcus Clarke, Henry Lawson and Miles Franklin. In the 1970s and 80s the ABC treated us to drama series based on Frank Hardy's *Power Without Glory*, Ethel Turner's *Seven Little Australians*, Kylie Tennant's *Ride on Stranger*, Eleanor Dark's *Timeless Land* to name but a few. As noted by the Australian Society of Authors, today new generations of Australians will discover the British literary cannon on their ABC, while our own literary tradition is ignored. This represents a return to the cultural cringe that threatens our children's cultural birthright and future dreaming.

ABC Drama needs to be freed from the shackles of British realism and try science fiction, fantasy, horror and the gothic popular with teenagers, young adults and working class audiences. The recent documentary *Not Quite Hollywood* (rejected by the ABC and happily screened on SBS), showcases an explosion in Australian action, horror, sci fi and ocker movies in their wake distinguished by visceral thrills and spills that enjoyed commercial and often critical success in the 1970s and 80s. Genre drama should not be equated with dumbing down. Respected filmmaker Peter Weir explored the gum tree gothic in *The Cars that Ate Paris* and fused Indigenous premonition and environmental apocalypse in *The Last Wave*. George Miller turned road rage into a new Australian myth with *Mad Max*. More recently the New Zealand government backed experiments in the

low art of horror and fantasy, nurturing schlock director Peter Jackson who went on to stun the world.

Audiences of all ages are voting with their feet for drama about Hobbits, vampires, super heroes, intelligent apes, plague-crazed zombies and the supernatural. Closer to home, surely ABC commissioners are aware of the cross-generational appeal of a certain wise-cracking Timelord beamed to us courtesy of the BBC?

Freed from the shackles of realism, the ABC can explore science fiction, fantasy, horror and the gothic genres popular with teenagers, young adults, working class audiences and the imaginative of all ages. These genres need not be the exclusive preserve of the Americans and British. For example Australia has a rich tradition of colonial gothic chillers and pulp fiction of the twentieth century, not to mention Aboriginal dreaming mythology.

Mark Scott has recognized the creative log jam at ABC drama and has a strategy for freeing it up. '[W]e've taken relatively few creative risks', Scott admitted after the budget windfall, but now with more money '[p]eople can expect us to take more risks.' Audiences should expect drama that is 'edgier and more confronting' within 'an array of offerings that are high quality and distinctive'. The ambition to take risks is to be applauded, but will be more likely to succeed if the ABC seriously examines the institutional and cultural reasons for the drama department's conservatism: a failure to engage with story-tellers and narratives in the wider creative community; a perverse aversion to adapting classic and contemporary fiction; blindness to the diversity of audience tastes; an obsession with a narrow range of genres and styles; and an unwillingness to expand the commissioning gene pool beyond a few favoured production houses.

Documentary and the need for Centres of Excellence

Over the past decade another 'sickman' for ABC Television is the documentary commissioning of the 'Factual' area. Under the Hawke/Keating Labor governments the ABC had a Documentary Department that produced outstanding historical and social documentary films on a par with the British and American imports that now grace our screens. Carefully researched and fearless docos of the calibre of *Cop It Sweet* and *Nobody's Children* made both Labor and Liberal government's squirm in the late 80s and early 90s. The funding squeeze from 1996 led to most documentary being outsourced to the independent sector or Film Australia, the department was absorbed and the ABC lost a centre of excellence and the public a critical window on the nation. While the world has seen a documentary renaissance headed by efforts such as *The Corporation*, *Super Size Me* or *Bowling for Columbine* ABC Factual specialised in connect-the-dots half-hour info-tainment and what looks like too many pedestrian purchases from the History Channel.

The absence of challenging historical documentary on the ABC has been especially disappointing. A Howard Government funding initiative for historical documentary via

Film Australia broke the drought for a while, but SBS through its series *First Australians* and *Immigration Nation* has been doing the heavy lifting for nationally significant historical documentary. Australia is a land of forgetting and ignorance of our traditions impoverishes us. I also suspect that part of the reason for neglecting the past is the wrong-headed belief by TV executives that Australian history is boring. How a story that starts with the encounter between British capitalist modernity and the oldest human culture and the establishment of a gulag of the old world's outcasts and along the way has genocide, class struggle, coups, the emergence of democracy, and of distinctive local arts and ways of life, the birth of nation, the neo-liberal auction sale and the mixing of every ethnicity on earth escapes me. Manning Clark divided Australian historical movers and shakers into straighteners and improvers and explored a narrative about the competing dreams to build from the debris of Western civilisation either the promised land of bourgeois comfort or a New Jerusalem where the common people prospered. There are countless other stories and traditions. Too many people engaged in television and filmmaking just don't know their nation's rich history, and if they do they are locked into an admittedly boring, white nationalist narrative that ignores the incredible diversity that always existed in Australia and makes for great stories.

Likewise documentaries about Australian artists are few and far between. The occasional forays have been impressive. Marcus Westbury's series *Not Quite Art* and Kathy Drayton's *Girl in the Mirror: A Portrait of Carol Jerrems*, commissioned by Arts and Entrainment rather than Factual, were both aesthetically ground breaking and intellectually provocative. But visual artists fair better writers on the ABC. While British authors are well covered in purchased documentaries from the BBC and other UK production houses, very few Australian authors have been deemed worthy of documentary treatment. The remarks by the Director of Television that cuts to arts infotainment will be balanced by a renewed push in arts documentary offers hope that we may in time see documentaries about Australian literary greats such as Marcus Clarke, Miles Franklin, Henry Lawson, Christina Stead, Kenneth Slessor, Dorothy Hewitt, Frank Hardy, James McAuley and Frank Moorhouse.

There are other hopeful signs. A name change at the ABC to 'Factual and Documentary', and the appointment of a Head of Documentaries suggests the ABC has reprioritised and recognised the importance of challenging Australian documentary. Intelligent, innovative documentaries – and even documentary series- about social, political and cultural issues, leavened with short, low budget guerilla docs that dare to offend and experiment with the form of TV itself. To recreate a centre of in-house documentary innovation, the ABC should establish cross TV/Radio units of excellence in history, social issues, culture and science equal to the standards set by the Religious and long defunct Natural History Units. These centres should employ top academically trained researchers on the cutting edge of those subjects and cine-literate aesthetic innovators as commissioners and production staff who are not beholden to outdated TV orthodoxies, who take risks and invent some new rules.

Building on *Lateline's* astute policy focus, a centre of policy research with its own weekly program should be established in the Current Affairs division that allows for

informed critique of government policy actions, rather than simply accepting the prevailing orthodoxies or reporting a political football game – though in style it should borrow from the playful and spontaneous intelligence of *Insiders*. Appearing on *Lateline*, journalism academic Professor Jay Rosen critiqued the ABC approach as the ‘quest for innocence’ and argued that journalists should bravely apply a ‘reality check’ to the claims of interviewees, by making it their business research ‘the knowable facts’. He criticized a tendency to journalistic relativism, stressing that everyone is entitled to their own opinions, but not their own facts.

It would have made sense to build on the centres of excellence already established at Radio National, so that they act as quality innovators for TV and online as well. But in the most shortsighted action of the past decade, ABC Management has axed many of these specialist units in radio, effectively blowing out the national broadcasters brains in vital area such as religion and the arts. New units of research and aesthetic excellence operating across radio, TV and online must be established by the board if the ABC is to be able to be able to produce content for its new multi-channel, multi-media future.

Outreach into the wider knowledge and creative community should be central to the role of these units, to glean talent and stories, but also to establish creative partnerships. Their staff should be fluid, bringing in the best and brightest from the arts, academia and the film making sectors.

The decline of flagship documentary and dramas series represent a shrinking of a sense of national ambition at the ABC, and their return will likely require a visionary initiative by government.

Arts and the ABC

Mark Scott’s idea of the ABC as ‘town square’ can be translated to the arts, where the national broadcaster has long played a role in taking up emerging ideas and talent from the avant-garde or counter-cultures, nurturing and professionalising them into accessible programs and helping them connect with popular audiences. From *Aunty Jack* to the *Chaser*, *GTK* to *Rage*, *Edge of the Wedge* to *Race Around the World*, the ABC has played a significant role in leveraging Australian cultural innovators from the fringe to the mainstream.

It is surprising that in a nation where more people participate in creative arts than sport that governments are still to grasp that creative and cultural industries are an important driver of the economy. As Richard Florida (2003) argues, encouraging the arts and cultural enterprise is the engine of economic growth in the new economy. If Australia is to sustain its standard of living and employ its people beyond the mining and property booms, it must become an exporter of value-added products. Australia is an English speaking, highly educated nation ideally placed to build on its successful export of higher education by also exporting television, film, music and online content to the world. Modern Western economies are diverse, and increasingly based on information, not just housing property, primary produce and mineral. In Australia, most of the creative

industries that produce (as opposed to distributing) cultural commodities are small or medium sized businesses, such as Andrew Denton's television company Zapruder's Other Films, surfwear label Mambo, or small publishing houses like Text. Today a small business is just as likely to be a media content production house, specialist data deliverers or children's birthday party performance artists than the local newsagent or real estate franchisees beloved of the small business lobby.

Australia's failure to perceive the economic value of the arts lies in part with our mine and farm obsessed hard-hat wearing political class, but a significant part of the blame lies with the Arts lobby itself, that insists on indulging the romantic myth of 'the arts' as autonomous from the market, and artists as innately gifted elite separate from the rest of us. This prejudice has led to government funding 'the arts' as something that is good for us - a welfare model. The result is that even as competitor nations such as Britain have embraced the notion of 'creative industries' as vital to diverse value-added exports, arts policy in Australia suffers from an over emphasis on the nineteenth century romantic 'artist hero' concept of cultural production, according to which the creator's talent is the font of creation. This approach uncritically divides 'the arts' off from other cultural production and the market, when in reality practitioners move between so-called 'high' or 'avant-garde' and popular practice.

However government media initiatives can act to bring creative projects from the margins to popular audiences, such as the introduction of a film bank (the Australian Film Development Corporation) by the Gorton Government, and the releasing of FM community-based licenses such as 3RRR and 4ZZZ and the creation of Double Jay by Whitlam Government Communications Minister Moss Cass. Crucially, audiences (eg as a community of fans and subcultures) and not just 'artists' contribute to the value of art, especially when it is first being developed within fringe markets. At certain times, the confluence of social and institutional supports for avant-garde subcultures, commercial and public sector outreach to alternative arts practitioners and portals enabling audience participation as a community led to periods connecting artistic achievement, popular audiences, and national-self expression eg literature, journalism, cartooning and painting 1890s, modern visual art mid century and cinema and literary publishing in the 1970s.

Since the 1980s, there has been an increasingly fertile cross-over between 'alternative' arts practice and popular culture industries. The mainstream market itself has become a delta, fragmenting into an array of style-based youth subcultures and identity movements and a proliferation of 'do-it yourself' independent media initiatives, beginning with public access radio, multicultural television and 'indie' records in the 1980s and proceeding through fanzines, community TV, affordable video and editing technology and on to internet based interactive web sites, magazines, blogs, 'mache ups' and social networking sites.

This century the ABC has continued to play a leading role developing and parlaying fringe creativity from student reviews, performance spaces, pubs and comedy clubs into popular culture and the national conversation. Examples include the shortlived a Fly TV, the national networking of Triple Jay and now the Unearthed channel, the documentary

rock and roll history *Long Way to the Top* and a slipstream of situation and sketch comedy programs already discussed.

Arts Minister Simon Crean's commitment to develop the new National Cultural Policy and the economic centrality of his other portfolio of Regional Development now leaves the way open for a paradigm-shifting approach by the ABC. The role of state in a National Cultural Policy is to encourage diversity of channels of production and distribution, and ensure a fair democratic spread of cultural capital. Further the state should encourage, within public and private cultural institutions such as the ABC those intangible networks that build cultural capital and audiences.

Equally important is the nurturing of talent in public and private media spaces that should be a diverse cottage industry rather than twentieth-century style silos. Simply throwing more money at the arts is not the answer if it goes to the same old same old, to be gobbled up by bureaucracy or used to indulge the tastes of a tiny percentage of the population. I am critical of the disconnection of publically funded Australian arts projects, including much ABC programming, from contemporary working class, suburban and regional life. We need to counter the dichotomy of artist and philistine masses with an appreciation of the creativity of popular cultural forms, craft skills and the role of audiences in creating value for art.

In place of the passive arts consumer watching an ABC infotainment program about 'capital A' artists, I want to emphasise the idea of all people as creative producers—a replay of the William Morris idea of do-it-yourself arts and crafts for the Digital Age. Youth subcultures, like culture jammers, hippies, punks and community hobbyist organisations, have sought to empower people to make their own art, from folk and rock 'n' roll bands, to "indie" record labels to amateur dramatics, You Tube videos and Blogs. Virtual media technologies have the potential to enfranchise a do-it-yourself creative culture in the suburbs. For content producers, self-curating their songs, satire, poetry, short stories, movies, debates, criticism on Youtube, Facebook or Twitter, the new digital ABC can be so much more than Mark Scott's town square. It can be the Twenty-first Century La Mama theatre, Tropicana Short Film Festival, Sydney writers festival, the Mechanics Institute, school of the air, open university, concert hall, game arcade, art gallery, journal, radio, and fanzine all rolled into a virtual Australian cultural exchange. An ABC unshackled from bureaucratic centralism and liberated by fast, participatory broadband, can set the stage for our national dreaming just as did innovations in the press such as the *Bulletin* in the 1880s and cinema in the 1970s.

National Memory and Education in the digital age

The ABC must also take seriously its role as a great repository of Australia's moving images and sound, and make this vast archive freely available to the citizens who have funded its creation. There are already snippets but not nearly enough. All ABC owned documentaries, dramas, current affairs, arts, science and programs should be available to Australians to download, especially for educational and research purposes. The British and Americans take very seriously public access to their TV history, yet the ABC

remains wedded to a professional sales model where archive 'footage' is sold to media professionals at expensive commercial rates for use in their own program making. If a much loved old ABC program is not one of the few to have been repacked as a DVD, viewing or listening to it is beyond discovery or the purse of most Australians, and thus our cultural heritage remains locked away in the vault. Some copyright and actors residuals will need to be cleared, and digitising the ABC's holdings for podcast will be expensive, but making these programs available to schools, universities, libraries and future generations is worth it in terms of civic national identity. Indeed parliament might consider legislation that sets aside residual rights in older ABC owned programs for educational and academic research purposes. This boon to our cultural literacy will dovetail nicely with the carrying capacity of the NBN and New National Curriculum's emphasis on Australian history, redressing the domination of American digital texts and data in our schools that has occurred in the name of free trade.

Putting the Public Back in the Public Broadcaster

The ABC needs some democracy at the very top. The Rudd Government honoured its election promise to surrender the government's right to make appointments and adopt the 'arm's length' *Nolan Rules*,³ used for choosing members of public boards in Britain. Vacancies are advertised and a selection panel independent of the Minister draws up a short-list based on merit from which the Government must choose. This should mean an improvement to the quality of public boards to which it is extended, as mates, dates, assorted party hacks and ideological axe grinders make way for the media-qualified or those with deep community connections.

However Rudd Labor failed to honour a promise to restore the staff-elected director to the board.⁴ But as part of the ALP's policy to 'further increase the transparency and democratic accountability of the ABC', why not extend the principle of election further, and allow the election of one or two non-party community representatives, and a representative from the cottage industry of independent producers who provide so much of the ABC's content? Strong candidates would run and the debates surrounding election to the Board will increase the relevance of the ABC to a changing community and enhance the public's sense of ownership. Election will ensure some ideas entrepreneurs and mavericks who may be knocked back by the Nolan process get to make their case. Furthermore, all members of the ABC's National Advisory Council, a body supposedly representative of the community but presently selected by the Board, must definitely be elected by the public.

Representative structures only go so far towards democratising the ABC. Online and new digital stations have the greatest potential to enhance audience participation in our ABC.

Viewers and listeners are now contributing ideas and comments through the ABC's forums and blogs. Just as listeners have done with radio talkback, audiences are becoming part of online content, contributing passionate and informed discussion alongside program makers. New media has also liberated the ABC from the tyranny of the ratings, allowing audience numbers and use patterns to be measured via pod and vod

cast downloads (17 million in 2007, with even more 'hits'). Lo and behold, as well as the favourite *The Chaser*, Radio National programs are actually popular, not just in Australia but internationally. In 2002 the Auditor felt that reliance on the commercial ratings system was inappropriate for measuring how successfully the ABC was meeting its charter requirements and recommended it establish its own Audience Appreciation Service.⁵ Unfortunately, the ABC persists in over-reliance on OzTam or Nielsen ratings and still favours executive hunches over audience consultation. But Online offers a qualitative way for audiences to impress themselves on their ABC.

While many an older rusted-on ABC viewer might sneer at *Big Brother*, this one-time channel 10 hit demonstrated that the younger audience wanted to participate in the narrative direction of a TV show. Building on its own pioneering efforts in audience generated content like *Beat Box*, *Race Around the World* and *Q and A*, I urge the ABC to allow audiences to shape content still further via the internet, commenting on pilot programs and even offering up their own pilots for comment, YouTube style, as children already do on the just-launched Rollermache site.⁶ The *Argonauts* could sail again, only this time by fibre optics and a set-top box.

Rather than the old paternalist model of public broadcasting the new digital channels could be the medium by which the diverse creative energy in the community, from suburban garages to inner city garrets, can be siphoned into the mainstream public conversation. I don't mean a *Wayne's World* of amateurism, but genuine democratic talent scouting, a 21st century version of the approach of F. J. Archibald's *Bulletin* of the 1890s, that scoured the bush and the back lanes looking for poets and artists and discovered the likes of Henry Lawson, Banjo Patterson and Norman Lindsay. The best Australian culture erupts when media enfranchise a passionate community and become clearing houses for new ideas and styles, as happened with the early *Bulletin*, 70s cinema, *Nation Review*, Double Jay and even *Countdown*.

Where the ANAO lamented a tendency for Shier-era bureaucrats to manage up the pyramid, to the Managing Director, the ABC's digital initiatives are orientating program makers in the other direction, towards their diverse audiences.⁷ This is a democratic and creative trend collapsing the barriers between consumers and producers, and it should be a priority for resourcing by the parliament and the current Labor government that pledged to ensure that the ABC is "able to exploit the potential of new technology".⁸ A targeted grant to assist the ABC continue its ground breaking initiatives in digital narrowcasting would be money well spent by a government interested in innovation and "democratic accountability".

It's time to jettison the ideological orthodoxies that have dominated the agendas of right and left for the past two decades. Applying this type of thinking, supporters of public media should move beyond the culture wars, and towards bigger ideas about a culturally democratic ABC.

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¹ [<http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/news/opinion/theres-a-whole-lot-more-to-see-with-abcs-2020-vision/2008/04/16/1208025283865.html>]

² The Australian Magazine

³ [<http://friendsoftheabc.org/labors-abc-policies-advance-and-retreat>]; [http://www.alp.org.au/platform/chapter_16.php#16public_broadcasting]; Australian Labor Party, *Platform*, 2007 Paragraph 59.

⁴ *ibid.*, Paragraph 59.

⁵ Australian National Audit Office, *Corporate Governance in the Australian Broadcasting Corporation*, 2002, 7.48-7.54.

⁶ [<http://www.abc.net.au/rollercoaster/kidstv/rollermache.htm>]

⁷ ANAO, *Corporate Governance*, 3.36 -3.37.

⁸ ALP, *Platform*, 2007, Paragraph 57.